

THE GATE

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



STORIES FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE BY:-

Dean Whittlock • Gary Kilworth • Christopher Amies • Sean & Barrington Bayley
• Kim Newman • Andy Sawyer

£1.50



The Graphic Artwork featured throughout this issue of 'The Gate' has been produced by a group of talented German artists who live in the Hanover area. They are looking for wider recognition and 'The Gate' is ever open to help in some small way towards this goal.

Cover illustration from a painting by Jim Porter inspired by the leading story in this issue. 'The Smell of Cloves.'

Jim lives and works in London and has been a freelance artist for about three years. He is self-taught in mainstream areas such as Race Horse portraits, wildlife studies, etc.

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WELCOME to Issue No. 2 of 'The Gate'. Those readers who were astute enough to have bought and read No. 1 will notice the radical change from small paperback size to the splendid A4 magazine format. This change enables us to make more impact with artwork and design and also gives newsagents less of a headache when trying to fit it onto shelves.

From your letters Issue No. 1 was well received, and the criticisms levelled have been taken note of.

I must thank Maureen Porter, the Editor of Issue No. 1, and who has done all the Editorial work in this issue for her brilliant efforts in establishing the high standards which I will strive to continue in future issues. Of course as your letters prove, the choice of content is very personal, and every story in Issue No. 1 was both praised and slated by readers. This underlines the expertise in the genre practised so well by Maureen.

I am sure, that like me, you will be entertained and excited by stories featured this time, and I look forward to your response. Positive criticism is welcomed and letters will be printed in The Gatepost section if they are not too abusive.

So, read on and enjoy.

Acknowledgements: Science Fiction Club Deutschland e.V., Peterborough Science Fiction Club.

Administration & Secretarial: Pamela Orgill.

Content Production Consultant: Pete (Cardinal) Cox.

Publisher: Richard Newcombe.

Mono Origination: Trevor Allgood, Creative Lines, 0480-64202.

Colour Origination: Anglia Graphics, 0480-414561.

Print Production: Adrian Fox, Robin Newcombe, Richard Newcombe, Steve Clarke, Keyprint, 0733-331500.

Address for all correspondence: 28 Saville Road, Westwood, Peterborough PE3 7PR.

Printed by: Keyprint, Peterborough, 0733-331500.

Subscriptions: The subscription price is £6 for four issues inclusive of postage (UK mainland). Overseas rates are available on application. All contents are ©The Gate 1990. Cheques and P.O.'s. should be crossed and made payable to W. Publishing.

Published by: W. Publishing. ISSN 0955-0933.

Submissions: Unsolicited manuscripts or artwork are welcome, but each must be accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope of suitable size. Unfortunately we are unable to reply to correspondents who do not enclose return postage. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to any unsolicited material however caused.



Dean Whitlock

The Smell of Cloves

When she heard that Luis was dead, Meara left the greenhouse lab and went to her outside garden. She sat on the stone bench in the centre and unhooked her respirator, letting the thin, cold air of Opal wash over her face. She took a deep breath. And smelled the scent of cloves.

Tears came then. It had been his idea, this odour of spice and warmth. Luis had looked into the future of Opal and seen calm, cloudless days, tall trees, a gentle breeze filled with different smells. So she added spice to her garden, splicing genes for an odour that no insect now on Opal would care about. Blatant, unfunctional, wonderful.

And now Luis was dead, killed in a storm somewhere near the Pinnacle Range, his plane brought down by lightning or ice or a gust of freakish wind. Lost for three weeks while teams searched the grey, rocky bog and worry became fear, then truth.

Rain blew over the garden wall and splattered on the bench beside her. A second gust blew the rain off, and, for a moment, the yellow light of Saiph lined the open arch above her. Then a third gust blew the rain back, Meara huddled in her suit, hood up, water dripping past her eyes. Rain and tears.

Taj found her there later, staring at her work, the strange flowers around her. Meara looked up, found a brief smile to show. She reached out and took Taj's hand, drew the younger woman down on the bench beside her.

"You're back," she said, still holding her hand. Did you bring ... Is Luis with you?"

"Not yet," Taj told her. "Soon. They wanted to analyse the crash site before moving him."

"Of course." They sat in silence a moment. Then Meara spoke again. "We'll bury him here," she said. "Not in the garden, I mean. On Opal."

"Can we?"

"He wanted it. We talked about it. He was 85, Taj. He expected it."

"Everyone else was shipped back home."

Meara shook her head. "This is Luis' home. It'll be mine, too."

They sat in silence again, and this time, Taj spoke first.

"This is a hard planet to love," she said, "Sometimes."

Meara shrugged.

"You don't fly in it," Taj said. "You don't have to fight it every day".

"No," Meara said, "I don't even leave the lab that often. You know, Taj, I've been here 15 years. Only Luis had been here longer. But I never went out with out him to the Pinnacles, to see the odd little species he'd find and catalogue. I can't even walk here without this mask."

"None of us can," Taj said.

"Nonsense. You can. Mitch can. Any of the field workers can. You wear one, but you leave it hanging open. You mix a little oxygen in now and then, but you breathe the air of Opal. Not me." Then she pointed to the plants growing at their feet. She drew in the scented air "But this, this is Opal to me, Opal in 100 years. And after that, Opal in 500 years. I've already started the designs for that phase, you know."

Taj smiled. "That, I can love," she said.

"Luis felt the same way," Meara said, "But he also loved Opal here and now. Maybe because he was a field botanist. Is Mitch that way? Does he talk about that?" Taj shrugged, and Meara smiled at her shyness about her lover. "Anyway, that's why Luis wanted to stay here."

"He'll be the first."

"Yes. He would like that. The first."

Mitch came through the gap in the arched wall then, hurrying, mask held up to his face. He stopped in front of them, breathing hard. He lowered the mask, tried to speak, then held it up again for another breath of richer air. Taj stood and made him take her place on the bench.

"Slow down, plant man," she said. "No one runs on this planet."

He took her hand from his shoulder and squeezed. But he stood again, too agitated to stay still.

"We're leaving," he said, then stopped to breathe some more. Meara looked at Taj, but she only shrugged. Mitch waved his arm up, toward the lowering sky.

"We're leaving," he said again. "Off the planet. Benson just announced it."

"What are you talking about?" Taj said.

"They're shutting us down," he said, almost shouting.

"Benson got word from Earth. They're sending a ship. We've got four months to pack up."

"Four months." "Pack up." They echoed him numbly.

"Yes, dammit, yes. We're supposed to cut off everything and just leave. The air plants, the labs, the field work, everything. The garden, too. Just cut it off, like a switch or something."

"Ridiculous," Meara said, standing. "The fools."

"But why?" Taj asked. She looked from Meara to Mitch and back.

"Ask Benson," Mitch told her sharply. He turned away from them, anger speaking in the set of his jaw, the sharp line of his back. Meara touched Taj's shoulder. Her own face had set, lines deepening around her eyes.

"Come on," she said. "We'd better get back."

Mitch turned back. "Talk to him, Meara. You're senior here now. Maybe he'll listen to you."

"Don't worry," she told him, "I intend to."

She led them out of the garden, clipping up her mask as she went. She went briskly at first, but the toil of walking

on the uneven, uncertain ground forced her to slow down. Taj and then Mitch came up beside her and matched their long strides to her stumbling pace. She cursed the bog and the wind and her short legs. But each step made her more angry. It was her bog to curse, dammit. They had no right to make her leave.

They came around the low hills that circled the squat, sprawling clutter of Tyler Base. Meara paused to catch her breath, staring at the low, grey buildings with new sight. More than ever, they felt like home. Beyond them, the twin stacks of the air plant reached into the grey sky, spewing their clear columns of enriched air into the clouds. She could hear the sea faintly, breathing in her hood, like the ocean in a shell.

She continued toward the base, and Taj went ahead to open the lock. They passed through quickly, not waiting to shed their surface suits, and went straight to Benson's lab. There was a small crowd already inside the door, but Meara pushed firmly at the first back. People turned, saw who it was, and moved aside.

Benson saw her coming and cut off in mid-sentence. He had been standing at his desk, arguing with the knot of angry voices around him. Now he sank wearily into his chair and ran his hand over his broad face. He was redder than usual. His scalp shone with sweat.

"So, you heard," he said flatly.

"What it's about?" Meara asked. She had known Carl Benson for several years, worked with him on more than one project before and after he'd become the local administrator. She saw no need for niceties.

"It's about money," he said. "Isn't everything?"

"What do you mean?"

"We cost too much. We take too long. We don't produce."

"Don't produce?" Mitch shouted. "We've done more for botany than Linnaeus."

"Oh, shut up, Mitch," Benson said. "You had your say." His voice was tired. He rubbed his face again and looked back to Meara.

"We don't produce at election time," he told her. That's what it all boils down to. Earth has a four-year attention span."

"Come on, Carl," She said. "This project has been going for over 20 years. It's been up and down at every election. You can't just sit there and let them hand it to you like that."

He held out a fat sheaf of paper. "Here's the transcript of the message. There's a ship already on the way, ready to ship every one of us back as soon as it arrives. With whatever equipment we want to bring. Generous, aren't they? It'll be here in four months."

"Four months? You know that's ridiculous. What about the long-term research? The breeding programmes?"

"Automate." He thrust the transcript at her. "Read it. That's what it says. Automate what you can."

"For Christ's sake, Carl," she said, "you can't automate the kind of work we're doing. Our plants need constant monitoring and manipulation. They need a tailored environment. Most of them can't even live outside. They're designed for Opal a hundred years from now, not four months."

"Well, that's what they've got."

"It's impossible. It can't be done."



"I agree. So you know what I'm going to do?" He stood up, looked around at all of them. "I'm going to shut it down." He walked over to a bench and swept his arm across the equipment there. Glass and metal crashed to the floor, liquid splattered against the wall. A cage of insects slid to the centre of the floor and lay there, buzzing within.

Meara stared at him, shocked. No one moved. He stared back, breathing hard, then leaned back against the bench, wrapping himself in his arms. He looked away.

When he looked back, his face was composed. "Shut it down, finish what you can, whatever. Then write your resumés. I'll have letters of recommendation for all of you."

They filed out slowly, not talking till they reached the hall, and then only in murmurs. Meara waited. Benson watched her, not moving.

"Luis," she said finally. "When are they bringing him back?"

"Tomorrow."

"Can we bury him in the garden?"

He stared at her a long time, pain in his eyes.

"No," he said quietly.

"It won't matter now, Carl."

"We can't do it," he told her. "He has family back on Earth."

"What?"

"He has family. They want the remains shipped back."

"But how do they know about it? We just found him."

"We sent word that he was missing." He read her look and lifted his hands. "It was almost a sure thing, Meara, He'd been gone two weeks already. We just wanted to advise them of the possibility. Anyway, they sent an answer right back. They're some kind of fundamentalists. He's to be cremated here and the ashes returned to Earth. It's in the transcript. They go back with the rest of us."

"It's not what he wanted, Carl."

"He should have put it in his will."

"He told me."

"That doesn't count."

"Carl --"

"He goes back!" Benson straightened and raised his fist. Then he turned away, leaned his hands on the table. "I'm sorry," he said. He started picking up broken glass. She left him.

Mitch and Taj were waiting in the hallway, but she shook her head and turned away from them. They didn't follow.

She walked slowly toward her own labs, mourning two deaths. Halfway there, she stopped, a small figure, hung in indecision in a grey hallway. Then she turned and went back to the lock. She clipped on her respirator and cycled through. Rain pattered on her face as she stepped out. She lowered her head and walked away from the buildings.

Blue-grey moss squeezed beneath her feet, then swelled back as she passed. Small beetles scurried around the rocks and puddles, chewing holes in some mosses, leaving others. They were the peak of evolution on Opal. Before man. Soon they would be the apex again. She carefully avoided stepping on them.

She went back to the garden, through the gap in the

stone wall, to the bench at the centre. It seemed as though she'd never left. And that a million years had passed. She dropped her mask and smelled again the sharp scent of cloves. She looked around at her handiwork.

Tanks around the perimeter bled oxygen and carbon dioxide into the space, and the shape of the walls helped hold it. A small generator buried in the soil kept it several degrees warmer than the outside. Drains kept the soil drier. *Her* plants grew there - - grasses and woody shrubs, fleshy stalks with broad leaves, slender trees a foot tall. Designed to break down peat, lower acidity, fix nitrogen in the soil. They would replace most of the current vegetation, and be replaced themselves as the climate continued to change.

She sighed and sat on the bench. Shutting this down would be the hardest.

Then she noticed a spot of colour in the green and grey, a brilliant patch of red behind two tiny trees. She went over and found a flower nested among the mosses. A small flower made giant by having colour among the overriding grey. Three tiny beetles crawled around the centre, eating the fleshy stamens and collecting pollen on their fuzzy legs. Benson's work.

She touched the petals, exhilarated. And also saddened. This was a monoecious plant, with separate male and female flowers. The male had bloomed, but the female had not. The beetles would carry the pollen till it washed off on the grey mosses. There would be no seeds.

She rose then and went to the tanks that lined the wall. She refused to think, only acted, shutting regulators. She worked her way around, to the switch box by the gateway, opened it, threw the black switches that shut down the generator.

Then she clipped up her mask and walked away.

The four months went quickly. She finished a few minor projects in her lab, just to see if they would work. Wrote up a summary of her notes. Let the rest go. With Luis gone, Meara was the senior botanist. She became their leader, of sorts, and spent most of the time settling disputes, soothing fears and making decisions that no one else wanted to make. She despised it.

Every step away from Opal hurt. It wasn't just her own work, it was the gestalt, the sum of everyone's work. The project on Opal was the most massive, co-ordinated biological experiment ever attempted, nothing short of remaking a world. True, Opal was almost Earth-norm to begin with. But the plan was to make it comfortable, accessible to the too many average Janes and Joes on Earth. Breathing room.

And it was not the sort of thing you could turn on and off with every change in political opinion. She cursed the fools on Earth and did their bidding.

Only Mitch and Taj kept her sane. When Benson held a memorial service for Luis and Meara refused to go, they stayed with her and helped her mourn. Then they went ahead with their field work as though nothing was wrong. Taj was the pilot, and a self-made botanist as well. Mitch had the degree and the obsession to collect and categorise. He took the time limit as a challenge, to identify every odd moss and fungus on Opal in the final four months.

Benson complained, but Mitch brought back insects, as well, and the zoologist in the man won out. He grumbled, but he typed and classified whatever Mitch brought him.

Then they had to shift everything to Windsor Base, halfway around the world, and Taj spent her time hauling freight. Mitch cursed and moaned, lurching around the base like an abject Ichabod Crane until things settled down and he could get back out in the field.

Windsor was crowded. Lab space was limited. Tempers flared, and Meara did her best to cool them. Then the ship arrived in orbit, and it was time to leave.

Meara sat in her makeshift office, scanning shipping lists. Taj came in the door, suited up for outdoors. She leaned over the desk, dripping on the forms and papers.

"Meara," she said, "You have not been outside since we came here."

"Who has the time?" Meara replied.

Taj took the list out of Meara's hand, crumpled it, and threw it on the floor.

"You've got plenty of time," she said. "I'm taking you for a spin."

"Taj, I—"

"Nonsense, as you yourself would say." Taj mimicked Meara's lecturing voice. "You are perfectly capable of making time. And I'll stand here dripping until you do."

Meara couldn't help laughing. "You are my saviour in disguise," she said.

"Meet us by the strip in fifteen." Taj disappeared down the hall.

Meara was there in ten, breathing hard from the quick walk out from the building, happy to have some exercise. It was a beautiful day, for Opal. Occasional clouds dotted the pale blue sky. It hadn't rained in at least an hour. The wind was less than ten knots. A perfect day for sight-seeing.

Taj was by the plane, running through her checklist.

"Mitch will be here in a minute," she said. She studied the sky. "Supposed to be some weather coming later, but nothing big. Not for Opal, at least."

Then Mitch came jogging up, a pack on his back and a sack in one hand.

"Got everything?" Taj asked.

"The works," he said, giving Taj a hug and Meara a huge grin. "Let's hit the air."

He put his gear in the rear hatch, and they climbed into the cabin. Meara started to get into the back, but Mitch stopped her.

"Take the front," he said. "Better view."

So she sat beside Taj and he squeezed into one of the two back seats. Taj fired the engines, ran through the checks, and rotated the engine hoods to vertical. Then she lifted them to 100 feet in a rush that left Meara's heart on the ground.

"Hey!" Mitch cried.

Taj grinned at Meara and winked. "You said, 'Hit the air' plant man. He gets airsick," she said to Meara.

"Only with you, air-head," Mitch grumbled. "Sane pilots fly slow."

"Not very likely," Taj replied. She rotated the engine hoods and they headed eastward, chasing the sun. They flew low, at about 1000 feet, but they flew fast.

"What's the hurry?" Meara asked Taj.

"Got a long ways to go."

"Where?" Meara had thought they were just going for a ramble.

Mitch leaned over the back of her seat. "The base of the Pinnacles," he said. "We thought you might like to see Luis' plants."

"But that's half way round the world," Meara said.

"Don't worry," Taj said. "They won't leave without us."

Meara laughed and watched the ground speed by below.

It was a 12-hour flight over land and sea, and Meara slept through part of it. They kept low, to avoid the clouds and winds higher up and the rapidly thinning atmosphere above that. They got rained on many times and pelted with hail, but Taj managed to avoid the big storms.

They passed just North of Tyler Base. Mitch pointed out the stacks of the air plant, and Meara made out the smudge of the base itself. Then the Pinnacles were in view on the horizon. Taj landed in the lee of some small hills. A short hike to the east, the mountains rose steeply from the plain, jumbled slopes capped by cliffs and sharp peaks. These were tall, young mountains. Snow covered all but the bottom slopes, and lichen covered everything up to the snow line.

Mitch unloaded two packs from the cargo compartment while Taj sealed the plane. He lashed the sack he'd been carrying onto his own pack. Then he handed Meara a pack frame with one tiny bundle.

"We'll carry the food and tent," he said, "but you've got to carry your own bed."

"Okay," he said, grinning skeptically, "Here's your air." He loaded two of the squat, orange bottles on top of the sack. Fifteen minutes later, as they climbed through the gullies at the base of the mountains, Meara was sorry she'd insisted.

They climbed for two hours, stopping occasionally so they could catch their breath. Meara knew they were stopping mostly for her sake, but she didn't push herself. She was content to go slow but sure. And in the end, it was worth the time.

They entered a small, south-facing ravine lined with moss that was more green than grey, and the clouds blew off enough to make the slope shine. The colour was a joy for eyes that had almost forgotten it. Mitch led them to a patch of clear ground in the centre of the bowl and set down his pack.

"Here," he said.

Taj dropped her own pack and looked around. The patch was ringed by rough boulders and washed by the thin sun light. She nodded. "It's good," she said.

"What's good?" Meara asked. "What are you two up to?"

Taj looked at Mitch, but he motioned her on.

"We're burying Luis," she said. "His ashes are in that sack."

She smiled gently. "We thought you'd like to be here." Meara looked from one to the other, speechless. Then she went to them and circled them both with her arms.

"Thank you," she said, Knowing that she could never say enough. "Thank you."

They took turns digging with the pack shovel, even Meara, though she tired quickly. But the box of ashes

was small, and they had no worry of anyone digging it up. Mitch set it into the hole, and they stood a minute in silence. Then Taj took up a shovel full of the loose, peaty dirt of Opal.

"Wait," Meara said. She bent down and took the top off the box. "now," she said.

Taj placed the dirt over the ashes, letting them mix. Then they filled the hole and laid the turves of moss carefully back into place. Meara's heart felt light for the first time in four months.

Dusk came quickly in the ravine, and they set up camp. With the sun gone, the air grew very chill. They ate in the tent and slept early.

They rose early as well, and broke camp after a quick breakfast. The weather had turned nasty and they hurried down the slopes as best they could, trying not to slip on the wet moss and fungi. The wind blew rain and sleet in their faces.

"Gonna be a rough ride as far as the coast," Taj said when they were back on the plane. She studied the weather radar with a frown on her face.

"Should we sit it out?" Meara asked anxiously. She had taken the back seat this time. Taj turned around and shrugged.

"Up to you," She said. "It looks like it could last a long time."

"Well, I guess we'd better go then." Even as she said it, Meara wished they could simply wait till it cleared. But Benson had a schedule, and they were just a day shy of breaking it.

"Off we go," Taj replied, turning back to the controls. Mitch groaned.

They went up slowly this time, Taj carefully balancing the vertical lift against the wind. Then she eased them into forward flight. The small plane rocked and yawned in the gusts. The pounding rain drowned out the sound of the engines.

They flew west, more or less, angling into the wind. Mitch studied their position and the weather map, giving Taj bearings that would take them around the worst parts of the storm.

Meara clenched her arm rests with numb hands and wished she had something to do. She didn't get airsick, but the buffeting wore on her nerves. The storm lashed rain and hail against the windshield. Twice, fierce winds threw the plane violently to the side and dropped them many feet. Mitch was thrown forward against the console and nearly threw up. The storm seemed to be getting worse.

Finally Meara had had enough. She leaned forward and shouted over the noise.

"To Hell with Benson's schedule," she yelled. "Take us down. We'll wait it out on the ground."

"Fine with me." Taj's words were calm but the strain showed in her voice.

Mitch turned and gave Meara a weak smile of relief.

Taj brought the plane down slowly through the turbulence. At one point, a sudden updraft jerked them up, then dropped them sharply into a quiet bubble of air. The sudden silence made their ears ring. Then the rain and wind slammed into them, and they pitched sideways. Taj's hands were clenched on the wheel, her face set. Meara found herself mumbling words of encouragement, anything to take her mind off the storm and her



suddenly queasy stomach.

At 100 feet, Taj swivelled the hoods and held the plane steady for a moment. Then she began the descent.

The gust hit them at 50 feet. Suddenly, the sky darkened and hail the size of ice cubes smashed into the right side. The back window shattered. The plane slewed left, twisted, the right wing lifting. Taj jerked at the wheel, hit the throttle forward. Then they were tumbling with the wind. Meara screamed. Her side window exploded inward. Rain and ice slashed her face. Then there was impact.

She came to, hanging upside down in darkness. Water splashed against her left cheek and ran under her hood into her hair. Her eyes burned. Her temples ached. Her arms hung down, hands resting in cold water on the roof of the cabin. Someone moaned.

"Taj? Mitch? There was no answer but the splash of rain outside. Then:

"Meara." It was Mitch, his voice strangely slurred.

"Are you all right?" she asked. She fumbled for her seat belt with one hand, trying to support her weight with the other

"Broke my nose," he mumbled. Then he moaned again, a short, painful exhale.

The belt came loose and Meara rolled into water. It was a short fall, eased by her one arm, but her head spun. Pain pressed her eyes.

"How's Taj? Is she OK? She crouched on the roof and groped for the door latch, disorientated by the dark and the pain and the unfamiliar position. Mitch shifted, gasped once.

"Breathing," he said finally. Meara let out a sigh of relief. "But I think I broke my leg, too." He gasped again.

"Maybe just sprained. I can move my foot, at least." Each word was a moan.

"Stop talking," Meara said. She found the latch and pressed it, but the door was jammed. Then she realised the window was broken out. "I can get out here. Are you still upside down?"

"He was, but with her help, he was able to undo his seat belt and open his door. They tried to wake Taj, but she stayed unconscious. They decided to risk moving her, and together they managed to get her down from her seat without striking her head. Mitch fell at one point and almost blacked out, but they got her into the lee of the wing and huddled beside her, waiting in the rain for dawn.

The wind died, and the rain became a drizzle. Saiph rose behind breaking clouds. And they could see the damage. The plane canted against the side of a hill, left wing crushed into the moss. The wing had struck first apparently, breaking the force of their fall. The tail was high, nose pressed into the ground, resting on the windshield. The right wing was twisted, providing at least some cover for Taj. She remained unconscious, breathing faintly.

As soon as he could see, Mitch crawled back into the crushed cabin, dragging his injured leg behind him. He played with the radio briefly, then gave it up and crawled out.

"Everything's dead," he said. His upper lip was swollen and purple, his nose bent sideways. Meara could barely make out the words. "Emergency beacon

may be working. Can't tell."

He limped back to the cargo door and wrenched it open. Meara followed and took the packs he handed out, laying them in the shelter of the wing. They wrapped Taj in a sleeping bag and ate a little. Mitch took only one mouthful. Eating was too painful. Meara's head still ached, but that was lessening.

"They'll come looking for us," she said, laying a comforting hand on his arm. "Benson won't want to be late."

Mitch shook his head. "Don't know where to look," he said. He looked miserable. "Didn't tell anyone."

She absorbed that in silence. "Do you know where we are?" She asked finally.

He nodded faintly. "Tyler's about a day's hike Southwest. Damn good that dose." He rubbed his leg.

Meara considered. "Have you got a compass?"

He looked at her appraisingly and nodded slowly.

"Then I'd better go."

He opened his mouth to protest. Looked at Taj. Then nodded again.

She ate some more while he set up a pack for her — Sleeping bag, food, water, and air.

"One spare," he said showing her the bottle. It looked very small in his hand. "Walk slowly, breathe every few steps." He started to demonstrate, but winced in pain.



"How about you?" she asked. "Did you keep any for yourself?"

"One bottle." He showed her that, too. "We share."

Meara looked at him and he tried to smile. She knew he was right. They could lie still, conserving oxygen. She would be using it.

"That damn base better not be too far," she muttered.

He showed her how to use the compass, sighting on hilltops, the only real landmarks. Then he wrote down their position.

Then she left. After the first, difficult step, she just concentrated on walking and breathing.

Her first bottle of air ran dry in the middle of the afternoon. She stopped and sat wearily on the ground while she changed to the spare. She held the empty, looking around the grey plain. Then she put it in her pack. She couldn't bring herself to leave it there like trash. She drank a little, pulling herself to her feet, and took another sighting on the next hill. Then she started walking.

The ground was uneven, a mix of hard dirt and soft peat. Stones stuck up through the moss and fungi. She stumbled often, sometimes splashing into holes up to her knees. The drizzle stopped, replaced by sudden, brief showers. Her suit was water repellent, but not perfect. She was getting wet and cold. As night fell, she found some large rocks for shelter and crawled into her sleeping bag without eating.

She fell asleep immediately, only to awaken in the middle of the night, cold and hungry. Broken clouds sped across the stars. Opal had no moon, and now, for the first time, Meara missed the smiling silver face. She ate and drank in the dark, huddled in her sleeping bag. Then she lay there shivering until, finally, she fell into an exhausted sleep.

A grey dawn woke her, stiff and sore and still shivering. Her headache had returned and throbbed between her eyes. She rose numbly and tried to stretch out the knots. Then she ate again and started off. The pack, light as it was, pulled at her tired shoulders. Opal was smaller than Earth, but after her fifteen years on the planet, the lower gravity was no help to her, she hurt.

At noon she began to ration her air, carefully counting each step before she would allow herself another breath. Her heart was pounding, trying to pump more oxygen than she could give it. Pain grew behind her eyes. She kept her head down, because the ground was even rougher, and because it hurt less. Then, as she stopped at the top of a hill to take a sighting, she looked up and saw the stacks of the air plant. They rose beyond the hills to her left. She had almost missed them.

She had barely enough strength to feel glad. She took a sighting on them and headed down the slopes, eating as she went, knowing that she was the end of her reserves. She couldn't afford to stop.

The stacks were farther than they looked. At each hilltop, she expected to look down on the base. And each view showed her only the grey, featureless bogs, and the stacks rising in the distance. The tension in her built, adding to the strain on her heart. She began to imagine she was only a few steps from the base, and suddenly caught herself running crookedly over the rough land. She forced herself to stop for a minute. She had been breathing heavily from her mask, using oxygen freely.

Too freely. The bottle was nearly empty.

She forced herself to walk slowly, counting steps again. Her head swam. Her vision began to blur. The pack was a monkey riding her back, chiding her. She forgot where she was, why she was walking through such a strange land. She stopped caring. She didn't want to leave Opal anyway.

She caught herself starting to sit down. She remembered Mitch and Taj. And she started walking again. She began reciting with each step, "This is for Mitch. This is for Taj." She stumbled, lost count again and again.

Then she found herself walking on a beaten path through a small, protected valley. A wall rose before her, a grey curving stone wall with an entry for the path.

She stumbled through into the garden and collapsed on the bench as the air bottle ran dry. She sucked at the mask, but nothing came. She tore it off, coughing blood, and gasped in the native air, and found it changed. It was rich and warm and scented with cloves. She raised her head and looked around.

The garden was in bloom. Flowers covered the shrubs and the ground, bright red and yellow blossoms open to the grey light. Insects crawled over them and flew through the air. One landed on the empty orange bottle, buzzed briefly, and flew off. Meara breathed deeply, feeling her heart slow. The colour filled her eyes with joy. Her vision blurred with quiet tears. All the pains in her body eased.

She knew where she was now, exactly how far she had to walk to the base. And she knew she could make it. She also knew that the garden would make it. The plants there had been without bottled air or heat or human intervention for four months. They were hardier than she had thought. And, as Opal changed, they would be there, expanding beyond the curved walls to the entire valley. Eventually to the plain, to work the changes she had designed them for.

She sat a minute longer, feeling strength return. No matter that we leave now, she thought. Someone will return. And when they do, they will find a different world.

She rose then and walked towards the base.

Dean Whitlock

Lives in Vermont in the USA, and works as a technical writer, producing user manuals and a newsletter for a software firm. As a freelance writer, he also writes press releases, video scripts, plays and science fiction short stories. His first published story 'The Million Dollar Wound' appeared in the 'Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction' and since then he has also appeared in 'Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and Aboriginal Science Fiction'. He also writes plays and has been known to write, produce, direct and perform in murder mystery weekends. "I live happily in Vermont with my wife, son, cats and mortgage. Whenever possible, we go hiking, canoeing or skiing".



Surfing Spanish Style

Gary Kilworth

"AN EXPERIMENT ON A BIRD IN THE AIR PUMP"

A picture in oils by Joseph
Wright, of Derby. (Jos.
Wright Pinxt 1768)

The air has been pumped out of the glass bowl, suffocating the bird, and proving the existence of a vacuum.
(National Gallery, London).

No, I'm not worried. Lost most of my teeth anyway. It doesn't hurt much now. You get used to it, except when they use the boot, then it hurts, but when there's lots of other passengers around like now, in the rush hour, then they just use the fist. I'll be all right. My nose isn't broken, that was done months ago. Why do we do it? Well, what else is there? Is that switched on? Do I get any money? Okay. Name's Frazz. with two z's.

Yeah, when we started out, there was seven of us. Batey, Rack, Split, Hotwire, Blindboy, Flyer an' me. Yeah, seven of us. Sixteen, all of us. The red bandana's our badge. I'm the only one that wears it now. We just left school and surfed down to London, looking for work. Well, there was nothing for us in Stevenage. The place was so dead it stank. It was rotten from having nothing to do but just lie around looking at its own belly deflate. Just like my dad, staring at the place where he used to have a fire when he was a kid, only there's a cold radiator there now, and muttering away to himself about the time the pubs were still open and at least you could get a pint, but now you couldn't even drown yourself. Mum? She was just as bad. Anyway, she pissed off about three months before I left school. Dunno where she went, but I think it was south. Well, where else is there any work?

Anyway, I'm telling you about the club. No, not a gang, *club*. We take surfing seriously. It's nothing like a street gang, guarding its turf. Surfing is an art and a science. Look, we were all bright lads - except maybe Rack, who was a bit of a retard - we came out of school with a handful of exams each, but what can you do with them, except hang 'em on the wall? There wasn't a job

going that wasn't filled before it was advertised. Oh yeah, they put some of them in the paper, but you need to know somebody, an uncle or something, to get one of them.

We didn't know anybody.

The club's called *The Windjammers* after a club I read about in Guatemala. That's where surfing first came from. Yeah, of course I know where Guatemala is. I told you, I'm not ignorant. They call it *Spanish style* because it came from a Spanish-speaking country, not because it came from Spain. Guatemala's in South America - central South America. In the magazine it said that the kids do surfing there because there's nothing else for them to do and that's the same here now. Why do you think surfing's so popular? Because the kids are *wild*? or crazy? I hear those old men and women saying, look at them, their poor parents must be going out of their minds with worry, you'd think they would get a sense of responsibility at their age, wouldn't you? Yak, Yak. They don't know what they're talking about. Responsibility for *what*? We haven't got anything to be responsible for. They think we wear these rags to look different, or what? This is all I've got: one dirty T-shirt and a pair of jeans. My track shoes wore out and I haven't been able to get another pair yet. *Find* another pair . . . all right, steal the bloody things, if I get the chance. What would you do? The fucking winter's coming. All right, all right I know you can't broadcast words like that. I'll keep it down.

Well London is just as bad as Guatemala City. That's not being unpatriotic, it's fact when you're looking at it from down here. We can't all be reporters, can we.

You're the lucky ones lady. Just lose your job and then you'll see what kind of . . . join the *police force*? You must be living in a fantasy world. Like I just said, if you haven't got a brother or an uncle in a job like that, you can forget it. Nepotism? What's . . . oh, yeah. Well those sorts of things happen when places become as desperate at Britain is. I had a home, at least. Some of those robber children that you see swarming down by Tower Bridge, nicking things off tourists - they probably never saw the inside of a house, I was *lucky*. At least we had four walls and food sometimes.

I knew one of those robber children once. He was eight years old and he lived inside an oil drum under the bank of the river. I think he froze to death, last winter. You know, these things happen, don't they? I've seen them eating cabbage stalks out of the gutter. Eaten them myself, sometimes. All that money the government spends on defending the country. What for? We'd be better off under a foreign power, wouldn't we? The people that treat us like shit are here already.

Anyway, I was telling you about us and how we came to London. We surfed down. Not all the way, but most of it. Oh yeah, it's easy enough to get *on* it. You can get aboard in the yards, and there are bridges where you can drop down on the trains, where they go slow enough. It's getting off's the problem. The railway police are waiting for you in the stations and they work you over. Well, I suppose we piss them off, we get away with it a lot of the time. That's how Split got killed. She kept spitting in their faces and swearing at them, saying things like, your mother screwed a warthog to get you, that sort of thing. They just used their fists at first, but then when she started spitting blood on their trousers they go mad and kicked her head from side to side. I saw it. I was shitting my pants because they were going to do me next and I was cursing Split for getting them to lose their snouts. When it came to it they were out of breath and they knew they'd given Split her last haircut - you could see stuff on the platform - so they went a bit easy on me. What? I don't think they knew she was a girl. Would it have made any difference? Maybe. I dunno.

No, the first of us to go was Rack, on our way down. He went on one of the corners. Well, what you do is use the carriage roof like a surfboard, see. You know, you stand like this - this is the stance, see. It's a matter of balance. My hero's Jesus Garcia Cordobes - JC, same as the real JC except for the Garcia. Well, we saw a video once showing these kids surfing in Guatemala, and one of them was JC. Some American reporter made the film for television and he chose JC to follow around, because he was the *best*, JC I mean. I copied his stance and I still use it now. JC's dead but he kept going three years. That's a long time for a surfer, especially over there. What? Oh, it was on the video, at the end, when the credits came up. It said, *Jesus Garcia Cordobes died on the wires a month after this film was made*. Something like that.

On the wires? Well, you see you've got two choices when you feel yourself going, when you lose your balance. You can go with *throw*, or you can hang the wires. Look, let me explain how Blindboy went. Yes, he really was blind. We used to show him where to stand and all that. It's a wonder he lasted as long as he did, but he had the *feel*, you know what I mean? That's more

important than seeing, than vision. Rack could *see*, but he didn't have the feel and he went first.

The wires, yes. Well, we were surfing down to Southend one day when we came to one of those low bridges. Local kids were playing tenpin with us. That's when they swing these lumps of paving stones on ropes and try to knock us off the train, like skittles. Sure, we would have killed 'em if we caught them, but how could we? I can see their point too. They've got nothing either, so that's the way they fill their days. Most of them aren't more than ten years old and if we get the chance we yank the ropes and try to pull them off the parapet of the bridge. That's the way of the play.

So, we saw this tenpin club, and I yelled at Blindboy to sway left, without thinking that this right-curving bend was coming up. The prick with the brick missed him, but Blindboy had gone too far over. He knew he was going to groove gravel and I heard him shout, *do I flap my arms now?* Great kidder, Blindboy. I miss him.

I'm coming to that, I'm coming to that. Now, at this point Blindboy had a choice. He could either fall from the train and kill himself on the bank - we were doing at least seventy-five - or he could grab the overhead electric cables, the ones the train uses for its power. What happens? What happens is you smoke of course. If there's enough to drive a train at eighty, there's enough to make charcoal.

I knew Blindboy didn't want to go downstairs and get broken up, but when you hang on the wires the train usually grinds to a halt. You short the circuit of course, what do you think? All right, okay, I know, but your audience must be as thick as . . . anyway, he didn't. Hang the wires I mean. He knew we would have been stuck halfway between London and Southend, because we would have had to run, and there wouldn't have been any chance of getting another surfboard back to London, not with the speeds the trains do out there between stations.

So he did a fledgling, hit a telegraph pole face on. Left his mirrorshades buried in the wood. No more Blindboy. That's it. That's all in the sport. Yes I call it a *sport*. It's as good as anything else, isn't it? Good as riding bloody horses or driving racing cars? Why not a sport? They should have it in the Olympics. I'd be champion. Last week I walked into one of these offices and asked them for a sponsorship, said I'd wear their logo on my T-shirt. I did it for a joke, but one of the men said, why don't we listen to the kid, he might have something, but the other one told him not to be so stupid.

Of course I'm good. I'm alive, aren't I? I'm seventeen and a half and I've been surfing for nearly two years, and I'm alive. The last one. Well, the last one except for Flyer, who can't surf now with only one leg. What? It got sliced off on the Northampton run. I dunno, we had to leave him there. I'm *assuming* he's still alive. They wouldn't let him bleed to death I suppose. Funny, they'll cave your head in when they're in the mood, but they won't let you die when you're all broken up and lying by the tracks with your bones sticking through your skin in a dozen places. They get all solicitous. Yeah, good word that, isn't it? Lady, you really know how to patronise people. I keep telling you, I'm not thick. I had a good education. It's a little raw now, because of the company I keep. I live down on the bank with the robber kids at

the moment. Anyway, they get *solicitous*. Like when the Flyer lost his leg. We went looking for it, back down the track, but we never did find it. We told the cops someone had stolen it. They thought that was funny.

So, yes, I'm a solid surfer. I ride the roof better than anyone else I know. The *Rollers*? Yeah, I've heard of them, but they haven't got one surfer that can match me. Not for style, not for guile. Shit, they're only been going for seven months, maybe eight. Hotwire? He nipped a bridge at seventy. I don't suppose he felt anything. I often think about that now - how it's going to feel? Of course it's going to happen one day. What do you think? I can't be lucky for ever. Yes, you need *skill*, but you also need luck too. Everybody needs luck.

You see there's *nothing* like surfing. Swaying with the rhythm of the train. You're up there, on top of the world, with the wind rushing up your nostrils. On your *feet*. It's the oxygen. I can feel my blood going electric, just talking about it. *You* never felt anything like it. The closest you're going to get is doing ninety in your open-top with your boyfriend screwing you while you take the bends; even then you won't come close to it. You see, there's nothing up there but you. You and the wind. Scared? Sometimes, before I go up, even when I'm up there. Sometimes I'm so scared I can't catch my breath. But it's an exhilarating kind of fear. Probably other sportsmen get it - skydivers, people like that. There's times when I think my feet are glued to the roof and *nothing* can throw me off. Then there's times when I think every kink, every curve in the rail is my enemy and I'm not going to live for another surf.

Me? I think I'd hang the wire. I'd rather flash than smash. But I'm not going yet, not yet. I'm all-city. I've surfed from every mainline station in London. That's what all-city means. Only J-J Thompson out from Tottenham had done more lines than me. I think J-J's coming to the end though. He slipped the other day, slid a quarter of carriage length, but managed to stay on. Lucky. Bit the end off his tongue, so I heard. No, I've never met him. We don't surf the same trains at the same time. We're rivals, not friends. There's an element of competition, but it's long term. There's no need for us to get together, to sort it out. It's simply the one who lives longest. Like Russian roulette.

The Windjammers? The old red bandanas? Just me left now.

Oh, I'll keep going, till I go. Go till I go. You keep asking me that, but really I dunno. I've always felt like we were part of an experiment, by them, you know who I mean. Seems like bit by bit we've had everything taken out of our reach, until now there's nothing. No chance of a job, no money since they stopped the dole, no hope for anything. If I didn't surf I wouldn't be able to breathe, because there's nothing else. It's all I've got. So I'll go until I go. There's some kids who go out looking for trouble, the street gangs and that, and there's some who rob, some who break into houses, some who drug-and-drink. Everybody's got to do something to breathe, otherwise you might just as well lay down and die, like my dad. Well, it's the same thing, staring at a cold radiator all day long. I reckon death's probably *better* than that, if you ask me. Might as well be a polystyrene tile stuck to some bloody ceiling, the wrong

way up, as be a human being in this country. Unless you surf, of course.

Can I have that bloody money now? I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since yesterday. Thanks. I can still say *thanks*, which is amazing. It must have been my mother. She told me, be polite whatever happens. So when the kick me in the gut, I say, thank you officer, thank you sir, I'd like some more of that tomorrow. Indoctrination. My mum also taught me how to use the cutlery at a seven course meal, just in case I should ever be invited anywhere and so I wouldn't embarrass everyone, especially her. Can you see me at a banquet? Me neither. Still, she taught us, me and my brothers, just in case. Well, we didn't actually have the mug and irons there. on the table. She just told us if we ever found ourselves sitting down as such a meal to start from the outside and work inwards, that way we won't get into any trouble.

Into any trouble . . . I got to go. Catching the eleven forty-five from Paddington. Got the best seat on the train, up top, first class. No, not today I won't. I feel good today, despite the way those buggers worked me over just now. That was tame. They must be feeling out of sorts. It's not them I worry about so much as the sneaky bastards - the ones who stretch cheesewire across the track. It's not the kids who do that, it's . . . well, you wouldn't believe me any way.

Nice to have met you. Gotta go. My board's waiting.

(Thirteen days after this documentary was first broadcast, John "Frazz" Davies was struck by a bullet from a .22 rifle by a person unknown. Frazz was between Bethnal Green and Mile End stations and witnesses say he instinctively grabbed for the overhead power lines. To the knowledge of Eastland Television Company, J-J Thompson is still alive and surfing, Spanish style.)

Garry Kilworth

Born into a service family in 1941, Garry Kilworth had attended more than twenty schools by the age of fifteen. He admits to having played truant a lot, especially while in Aden, where he spent a considerable time fishing for catfish and getting lost in the Hadhramaut desert. He left school before his fifteenth birthday with no qualifications, and signed up with the RAF for fifteen years. Stationed all over the world in such exotic locations as the Maldives and Singapore, Garry started to write. In 1974 his winning of the Gollancz/Sunday Times short story competition coincided with his leaving of the RAF. He took an English degree from King's College, London, and started to write seriously. He has now published ten novels, fifty short stories, three children's books and some poetry.

He has been married to Annette for twenty-seven years and has two grown-up children. He now lives in Hong Kong.

Terminal Velocity

Christopher Amies

The boy in the blue jumpsuit was standing at the edge of Malham Cove, looking down the three-hundred foot drop. He raised a hand to the wind, and jumped. He spiralled down, arms outstretched in the sunlight. He waved to his family on the way down, and landed with a thump among the brush at the foot of the Cove.

Myriam stopped hugging herself and applauded wildly. The boy was about twelve, Myriam was nine, but she was convinced she could do as well as him.

The boy scrambled to his feet, dusted himself off, and scampered to the side to watch the next one go. Malham Cove was kids' stuff, Myriam decided. You didn't see grownups doing it.

Myriam looked up and saw an aircar drifting lazily past at a thousand feet or so, its occupants leaning out into the breeze. It went by like a dandelion seed, propeller swinging in a silver circle.

One of the occupants jumped out. She watched as he tucked his knees up to his chin, then threw his arms and legs out. As he came to Earth, he crouched down as you were supposed to and rolled into the bracken. Myriam hoped he hadn't hit a stone.

How slow summer time was, Myriam thought. Much slower than winter, when you had to rush around and hurry or you would freeze to death if you weren't careful. Nobody jumped in winter; it was too cold. Of course some lucky people could afford to go away then. Amanda Harries was going to Bermuda with her mater and pater, and she wasn't letting anybody forget it. Summer, though, was nice and lazy, except that it went to fast when you thought of having to go back to school in September. Anyway, Daddy had promised her a little aircar of her own when she was ten. Just a baby one that she couldn't get up to much in, but still.

Myriam, like most little girls, wanted to be a jumper. But she knew most the other girls were only copying each other, showing off, and spending their Daddie's money. Myriam meant it. She had decided.

No, cliffs were for babies and people who couldn't afford aircars. And now that aircars cost less, so many more people could have one, which ought to be a good idea except that it would mean the sky would become terribly crowded. People who really cared about jumping would be squeezed out by show offs and oafs. People who just did it because they thought it was big, or it was the latest thing to do. Myriam wanted more than that.

Myriam strolled back to the family aircar. It was dozing, its wings folded. Myriam stroked it on the snout and whispered in the sensors it used for ears. It snickered and opened an orange, multi-faceted eye.

The little girl climbed aboard and watched as her parents walked up the path hand in hand. Five minutes later, with the familiar upheating rush of wings, they were off.

What a brat I was then, Myriam Petronia thought, remembering that particular afternoon. Just the sort of fat little girl cartoonists love to take the mick out of. But I was right in one thing. I did become a jumper.

She was perched at the edge of the aircar, waiting for the signal. The part-machine, part-creature beat its wings in a circular pattern, holding the hover. Just suppose, ran the little voice at the back of her mind, that this time the laws of physics decided to change. They've been known to in the past. You wouldn't realise until you were on the way down, much faster than ever before, and then Myriam Gervaise Petronia is a red mess on the grass, sans shape, sans form, and a large insurance policy to be cashed by a not-quite-ex husband.

This little voice was always there, and she had learned to put up with its bickering. The small corps of dissenters in the state of the mind. Were it to happen, she thought, it might be an idea if Roger were standing underneath at the time. He was dense enough to stop her. And it would serve him right. "Well, Hello," he used to say, "Ah suppose you've been jumping again, har har har." So much for marrying outside the sport so as not to carry it on into her home life. The last thing Roger had said to her was that she was emotionally incapable of being married. There was no answer to this except his favourite ashtray, which he managed to duck by an inch.

Her answer now was that marriage was convenient for Men -- i.e. Roger - and inconvenient for Women -- i.e. her. Any woman who would actually do it needed her head examined. Isolde maintained her patient hover, keeping station over the drop zone at twelve thousand feet. Myriam's little voice was no longer really the what-if one, she realised, it was the "emotionally incapable." She had always regarded herself as a fire in human form, and emotional furnace ready to devour anything and anybody, so Roger was hurting.

She looked out to the horizon, down to the drop zone. To her north, the North Downs and to her south the Channel all grey and silver and blue. A perfect day for the jump.

"Ready?" Came a tinny voice behind her ear.

"What's terminal velocity?"

"Point two five."

"That'll do. Wind speed?"

"Five clicks."

"Good oh."

Point two five was .25 of Absolute Terminal Velocity. You couldn't jump if it went over .6.

If you tried you'd be dead. That was her Little Voice again. It had never gone over .4 in her lifetime, and she never expected it to. It was all bound up with magnetic physics, which for a jumper she had comparatively flunked.

She looked down. Straight down. Her usual test of nerves. If she couldn't take this one, she had no business jumping. The drop zone was clear. Empty. A nice patch of grass to land on.

Not a Roger to land on. No. He never used to come and see her jump, and as for doing it himself, he could never see the point. Despite which he spent upwards of ten hours a day chasing fractions of a penny, and buying and selling goods that didn't really exist.

There was one fellow-jumper, a young man who knew her a bit, might even have had an affair if he'd dared to with her married. But he was a few years younger and adultery plainly wasn't his style. So she was virtually a free woman.

The wind was stabilising now, riding five clicks from the west. She could see her piste as a three-dimensional construct; the way the video would show a competition jump when it was being judged. Red for the vertical component, green for the horizontal, blue for the movements of the body.

Some way above, an aerial convoy steamed past, its windsails full, Rainjamming, Myriam guessed. Heading for a storm to bounce off, If this sky lived up to its promise, they would be searching for a long time.

Myriam listened. The clicks in the earpiece had started. Click-click-click-ping! And she was off, over the side, that hollow feeling that always came when the stomach feels discretion to be the better part of valour and wants to be left on board.

The key was to watch the target and move exactly. The imaginary corridor of red and green twisted away down, its markers showing at the edge of her vision in her goggles. Passing between the markers was second nature now; nothing short of a freak gust could send her outside one.

Above her, Isolde neighed and made the climbing turn to the left that the launch car always made after the jumper went.

An expensive creature, Isolde, but sweet-tempered and patient to a fault. A good jumper could stand or fall (ha!) by her car's attitude. Isolde had been bred in the West Drayton tanks, the most prestigious in Europe if not the World. And she wasn't a reject either.

The jump went swimmingly. Myriam felt like a creature made of raw, pure light as she went down the track, as perfect a dive as she had yet made.

She alighted on her feet, a quick crouch and then a straightening to stand in the central spot.

Myriam looked up to see her dear Isolde sweeping down like a creature out of myth, like a whitewinged horse touching her hooves to emerald grass.

He called her his skydancer. She found his infatuation difficult to live with, but easier than Roger's deprecation. Finally she had moved out, and found a flat with Terry, in a part of town that seemed to be ignored by developers and grasping landlords alike. Why, she had asked herself a hundred times, did she feel she needed to live with anyone at all. When Megan Evans asked her she had a much quicker reply.

"Because it was a way out, I would never have done it on my own."

"You would, Myriam."

"Not so quickly."

"But why with a man? Why not -"

"With you? Because I wanted to show Roger up, of course. If I quit with you, he might suspect we were having a scene, but even if Terry and I weren't bonking each other's brains out every night, Roger would think we were."

"Besides, Roger can't fly, Myriam."

"None of us can. We fall in a way not everyone can do, but we can't fly. Not like the 'cars.'"

"First we feel, then we fall."

"Quite."

And that was what she decided she wanted. To get beyond gravity. Beyond simple physics as they were understood, beyond mag. phys. in which she had achieved a Grade D because she used to cut classes. It was enough to know that the mechanics of it worked, that was all, But to get beyond it ...

Megan stretched lazily on her bed, letting her hair almost touch the floor.

"I'll tell you what you risk most, Myriam my love."

"What's that?"

"Exhaustion."

"Meg, that is crude!"

"It's true, though. Watch your fall lines."

"Fall lines, is it? I mean to fly!"

Yes, fly. What do we do? Myriam asked herself. We fall. We think of newer, fancier ways of falling, but we still fall. She watched Megan making tea, thinking of the way the tiny redhead jumped, just like a child jumping out of a tree, seeming to put no effort at all into it.

On her way to the kiteway station, Myriam experimented. She jumped off the Richmond Road canal bridge down to the footpath, wondering if there was any way of stopping the inexorable downward motion. There didn't seem to be. Perhaps it was like Time, one way. But didn't Time really oscillate around the core, with a frequency that could be tapped into if necessary? She seemed to remember that from one of the classes she hadn't been able to skip. Maybe in all its complex of laws, gravity held a secret like that.

She rode the kiteway glumly, elbow on the edge of the basket, hand cupping her chin. Far off towards Brentford she could see a jumper leaving his aircar. Straight down. A good jump, but straight down.

Yes, people rode the winds and sometimes managed to be borne upwards; but this was only short-term gain and if not cheating, it was a least not quite kosher.

The next morning she took Isolde up for a jump. Seven thousand feet this time. The aircar, given her head, beat strongly up to the required altitude.

Isolde stopped and hovered. Myriam stepped to the edge of the car and looked down. "Clear below," she called over the voicecom. The clear was acknowledged. No wind, termvel. 0.24. A slow day. Click, click, click, ping! And down she went.

Upwards, she thought while falling. That is ludicrous! It is as much as I can do to keep control of falling, never mind climbing like an aircar or a skyhound.

Just suppose she slowed right down. Yes; arms and legs out, body forwards. Practically stopped. But scarcely moving downwards was a whole lot different from going up.

Everything into forward motion. The display in her goggles warned her that she was approaching the edge of the corridor. As she swept forward, the warning buzzer sounded in her ear. Myriam floundered, dipping and bobbing in mid-air. For a moment she thought she was going upwards but it was just a breeze catching her.

She flipped onto her back and fell down the corridor, coming to a textbook two-point landing.

Her coach was distressed.

"What was going on up there, Myriam?" he asked.

"I lost control. Just for a second."

"Is that what it was? Weren't trying to fly were you?"

Myriam started after him, but Ulric laughed and walked off. Myriam went into the clubhouse and studied the competition ratings. She was doing very nicely. Just as well, with the Open Nationals in six weeks' time. Hopefully her performance this time wouldn't exclude her from the team.

Over the next weeks she studied techniques minutely until she was blue in the face. She made nine jumps in



three days, which was going some. Her rating, which had gone down slightly after her "experiment", edged up again until on the Monday she was certain to be included in the team.

Her idea of flying stayed in her head. She discussed it with Terry late at night, so late that the neighbours complained about the "noise" from their flat.

"Don't try it on the day, though, will you?"

"D'you think I'm daft, lover?"

The day of the Open National Competition. Flags and bunting flying, hundreds of cars and thousands of people, music from a silver band. A sky they might have asked the gods for specially.

Ulric cornered Myriam in the clubhouse.

"Good luck kid. And listen; don't try any flying stunts. You're good enough as it is."

Am I? Myriam wondered. I know I'm as good as any of them, but is that good enough?

Megan kicked in, her eyes behind mirror shades.

"A new fashion?" Myriam teased her. "Or did you and the boyfriend overdo it last night?"

"Don't even bother speaking to me before the jump," Megan said. "I'm all nerves." She gave her friend a brittle smile and went to sit in a corner.

The competing teams were certainly good. Myriam watched them jumping and willed each one to somehow fly. Or at least, she told herself, to lose enough points to let London West win. Her nerves were buzzing, her fingertips were on fire, her stomach was a vacuum. Jump followed jump. She readied Isolde, stroked her and gave her wings a rub. The big compound eyes watched her with a keen understanding and even anticipation.

Aircars beat their wings and whinnied. Someone failed a dope test. Try hash instead, was the suggestion the of the control centre.

Myriam became hollow inside. No wonder, she reasoned, Roger had said she was emotionally incapable. Incapable? She would show them. She stood by Isolde's flank, trembling. The sky suddenly became an enemy, not a friend or a lover inside whose body she moved at her pleasure, but an inexorable process of digestion that took her in at the top and spat her out at the bottom. Something that would spit her out. Unless she did not let it.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"You alright, Myriam?" said Ulric. "You want to call off your jump?"

"Hell no! I can't wait!"

"Ten minutes!"

Isolde was carrying her up. Termvel. was 0.29; high, but not alarmingly. The ground, the landing field, and crowds, the trees withdrew and became tiny. The wingbeats drummed her through the air and the propeller spun to drive her forwards.

At the top of the arc, Isolde stopped, wings moving through their circular pattern.

Myriam steadies herself, with a word to Isolde, then looked down and went over the side.

She carried out a positioning move, entered the corridor and went into the dive.

At one she thought, somethings wrong. She couldn't say what, but the air was moving past her faster now and she was having to catch for breath. She went into flat position and that slowed her a little but not much. Through the voicecom she heard whispers of alarm from below. She spun within the markers of the corridor and went onto her back. Then with great difficulty righted herself and looked down.

Great alarm. The ground should not be this close yet. It was a though she were falling through thinner air, unable to hold her up, as though a net had given way beneath her. She risked another look down, and saw the ground rising nearer, people moving away from the landing site.

This is what the Little Voice was saying all along, she told herself. It was of course right. No, why should it be right? Why should all these laws rise up against me? Should have stayed at home or on the ground where we belong. Such a fine invention, mag. phys.; allows you to cheat the inexorable laws. Tough shit, Myriam, you're going to be jam.

The ground was very close now. A brief but peircing scream jarred her; her own. Fear changed to white anger. She remembered her desire.

And flew.

Chris Amies

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The Phobeya

Sean & Barrington Bayley

Aumk Kestem greeted the news which came to him, one sunny Alzarean morning, with an initial placidity attributable only to the fact that nothing, at that moment, could have disturbed his peace of mind. He was being worked on by an easy chair. Enticing vibrations relaxed his muscles. A pulsed magnetic field filled his body with delicious sensations. From the headrest, encephalic alpha waves purred through his skull to clear his mind of all negative tension.

"Feel like some nice harmonious music?" the chair suggested.

"Some Mozart? A little Katyole?"

"All right," murmured Aumk. "Mozart."

"Just one moment, then," the chair soothed, and multiplexed general store to make a selection. What it got instead was a public service announcement.

The normally controlled, purely informative voice contained a suppressed excitement. "It is announced that a phobeya has been sighted in the third dodecant of our system. The phobeya is observed to possess four satellites in resonant Galilean motion, and accordingly government astrists have identified it as belonging to the species *phobeya tetra*. On its present course there will be a close encounter with Alzarus II in not more than twenty hours, and citizens are advised to check their anti-liquidisers for proper functioning. Further news will be issued as it becomes available."

"I didn't know there were any phobeyas around here," Aumk said dreamily. "Get me a cool drink will you? I'll have a whipsy."

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik drifted into the room, and with it a niggling thought caused Aumk to lift his head from the headrest.

At once the soothing alpha rhythms faded out of range, and so, therefore, did his unconcern. In its place stark fear clutched at his heart.

A phobeya!

He jumped from the easy chair, knocking aside the thick whipsy with its wide drinking tube that the room servitor was bringing him. "Room! How long have there been phobeyas around here?"

"It is a commonplace that phobeyas are a hazard faced by all civilised planets in our region of the galaxy," the room replied calmly. "There is evidence that Alzarus II received a visit from such a beast in the past. The

remains of the aboriginal civilisation, pitiful as they are, show signs of having been liquidised seven thousand Alzarean years ago."

"This is probably the same one coming back!" Aumk exclaimed, incredulously angry. "I should have been warned in the prospectus!"

"You are referring to the theory that phobeyas periodically return to previous feeding places. That theory has not been validated by experts."

"There *are* not experts on phobeyas!" Aumk screeched. "Nobody has nerve enough to go near one! Anyway, I'm not hanging around to get turned into goo. Contact the port and book me a place on the next ship out."

Sensing the changed mood of its occupier, the room faded out the Mozart. "All flights are grounded pending the emergency," it informed him, and then added, with what sounded to Aumk like a note of triumph, "and anyway you wouldn't get clearance until your two years residence is up."

"Two years residence? At a time like this? From a trick prospectus?"

"You won't have any legal recourse there, I'm afraid," the room (an Alzarean room, Aumk reminded himself) said, "not with your wish signature on a settlement contract. Any colonisation prospectus naturally puts the best face on a planet. There's stiff competition among new nations for colonists."

"Yes, it wouldn't do to mention how a phobeya has already eaten the previous civilisation here," Aumk retorted bitterly.

"Quite! And since no statistical significance attaches to the fact, the whole question comes under the heading of *non onus*. Alzarus is not responsible for normal accidents that may befall its citizens."

"Being eaten by a living planet? That's what you call a normal accident?"

"Take heart, citizen!" the Alzarean room enjoined. "Our defence forces exist to serve you! The phobeya will not reach Alzarus II unopposed! For your information, of the last six reported attacks by phobeyas on civilised planets, only two ended in total annihilation!"

The government's crazy if it thinks I'm going to stay here, Aumk told himself. As if listening in on his thoughts, the room added a piece of strident propaganda. "What would happen to mankind's brave new nations

if their citizens fled every time a crisis happened? You're an Alzarean now, and us Alzareans have got to stick together -"

"Shut up." Aumk grated.

Exuding reluctance from its walls, the room did so.

"And get me Cera," Aumk added.

Cera was the girl Aumk had taken up with since coming to Alzarus. She answered his call in a state of disarray. Her hair was awry. Her upper lip was lifted in sheer terror.

"Have you heard the news?" she whispered. "The phobeya! The phobeya!"

Aumk leaned earnestly towards the vision plate. "We must discuss how to get away from here."

"Can't. Got to stay for the phobeya."

Aumk reminded himself that Cera, a daughter of original settlers, was one of the very few second generation Alzareans. She was barely seventeen years old.

"Stay home," he growled. "I'll see you later."

Leaving the apartment, he hit the street to be greeted by a baying noise, a chorus of dismay that drifted down the avenue. Swiftly it came closer. "*The phobeya! The phobeya!*" On the next corner he was knocked down by its source, a mob of about fifty young men and women

He picked himself up as the screams receded. His leg was bruised. He leaned against a wall and dusted himself down, gazing ironically at the patriotic posters adorning the avenue in their decorous, ever-changing pastel colours.

A NEW WAY TO BUILD A NATION was the favourite slogan. BE AN ALZAREAN. ALZARUS STRONG - MANKIND STRONG. Not until Alzarus had acquired a population of some millions of second generationers, he guessed, would its government feel confident enough of its *nouveau populace* to dispense with such crude propaganda.

The streets were nearly empty as he hobbled towards his destination. People were staying home and trusting to the authorities. The knot of panic he had just encountered, he reasoned, had been a taking advantage of the situation so as to indulge in catharsis.

The Loose-Tongued Diner occupied the ground floor of one of Alzarus City's oldest buildings. It was all in one piece, the walls, floor, ceiling, tables and chairs having been cut from a single log of the monster lazarus tree, of which a grove lay fifty miles distant and which, however much it was cut down, its roots dug up, or the ground where it grew sown with poison, grew back again in a remarkably short time.

Accepting a flask of root coffee, he craned his neck, peering into the cubicles over the low partitions. The wood of the lazarus tree had its own natural varnish of a dark red-brown colour. It seemed to soak up the light of the lamps, on account of which *The Loose-Tongued Diner* was always dim and gloomy-looking.

Moss Carsinger, Chieftain of the Tedium Club, he

was eventually located in a cubicle at the far end, in conversation with two older male Tedium Club members. Like nearly everyone else on Alzarus he was a colonist, though with a citizenship of more than three years, as against Aumk's half-year, he qualified as an old hand.

His lumpy face, with the piercing blue eyes and needle-sharp waxed moustache, glanced up at Aumk as he slid into the booth.

"Heard the news, Aumk?"

"Yes. Your people are cheering at it, I suppose!"

Moss chuckled ruefully. "We're thinking of changing the name already. How does the Crisis Club sound?"

The Tedium Club's full title was the Anti-Tedium Club. Star Colonists often were refugees from the boredom of civilised life - though their flight from Tedium was generally a failure, since life in the colonies was as unvarying as life in the developed worlds. There was little work to be done, and as part of their settlement contracts colonial governments provided new citizens with a high standard of life *gratis*. The Anti-Tedium Club was given over to dangerous sports - marsh tunneling, hurricane hang-gliding, crumble-mountain climbing, sun-jumping, and so on. There weren't many other kinds of accidental death left in modern society.

Moss leaned close. "If it's too much for you, try one of these."

Under the edge of the table, a number of little yellow tablets lay in his open palm. "What are they?" Aumk asked.

"Insanity pills. Helps you get through it. Best not to know what's really going on."

"Listen," said Aumk, turning his head.

The muzak emanating from the sound point in the next booth a moment before it had been playing *Onward, Onward Alzarus*, had given way to a "topical information break". "First of all," said the normally cheery but now *slightly* more serious DJ, "let's hear a spot from the file on phobeyas in the public encyclopaedia."

The factual, neutral and unintentionally chilling voice of the encyclopaedia followed. "The existence of living, predatory planets known as phobeyas was revealed to mankind in 1C51 UA, when the colonisation of west-z85 sector began. Data remains scant, but it seems clear that the stamping ground of phobeyas is mainly restricted to this sector. Their size is roughly five to six thousand kilometers in diameter, with a common mean density of about four grams per cubic centimeter.

Two species, or possibly varieties, are known, nomenclatured *phobeya tetra* and *phobeya sexta*, this being a reference to the number of attendant satellites - four for *phobeya tetra* and six for *phobeya sexta*. These satellites follow precisely resonant Galilean motions. Though no more than a few hundred kilometers in diameter, they are rarely irregular in shape but are nearly always spherical, indicating a low incidence of accidental collisions in their history..."

(*Bip bip* as the programme controller cycled through the text in search of interesting passages) "...Phobeyas seek a highly specialised type of food which consists of the entire contents - artifacts and inhabitants both - of civilisations that may be found on the surfaces of 'dead planets' - this being how all planets other than phobeyas must now be classified. A phobeya is not interested in a biosphere that has not developed intelligent life. It is not even interested in an intelligent species before it has developed urban civilisation or its equivalent..." (*Bip bip*) "...The feeding method of phobeyas is comparable to that of spiders and some insects. First the food is liquefied, and then it is 'sucked up' to the phobeya in the form of a solution. To accomplish this the phobeya closely approaches its prey, then turns its south pole towards the surface of the victim and extends a 'proboscis' in the form of a whirlwind or whirlpool. The substance of the vortex is enigmatic, as no sample of it has ever been obtained for analysis. Its super-solvent property classes it a liquid, though in density it is lighter than any gas. It is remarkably penetrating, filtering through an atmosphere without raising more than a light breeze, and dissolving solid objects in minutes or seconds.

running pell-mell, faces delirious with fear.

He picked himself up as the screams receded. His leg was bruised. He leaned against a wall and dusted taint for analysis. Its super-solvent property classes it a liquid, though in density it is lighter than any gas. It is remarkably penetrating, filtering through an atmosphere without raising more than a light breeze, and dissolving solid objects in minutes or seconds.

"parallel reference may be made to a commonplace but also remarkable substance, water. Though classed as a liquid, water has a spare hydrogen bond that makes it more like a transient crystal that is constantly breaking up and re-forming. This constant activity enables it to interfere with the chemical bonding of other materials and to absorb them into itself. Water is therefore an excellent solvent. There is every reason to believe that the dissolving juice of the phobeya is also transiently crystalline, though its action is some orders more efficacious than that of water. Without such crystalline cohesiveness, it is hard to see how a phobeya manages to withdraw every drop of the juice once liquefaction is achieved..."

The cheerful voice of the DJ segued in. "That's what the 'cyclopaedia has to say, folks. Now Luminaire Academician Zeikoss, right here in the studio with me, will flesh out the dry facts. Luminaire, Phobeyas present a number of mysteries to science, don't they?"

"Oh, yes indeed," responded a voice with a fussy accent Aumk couldn't place. "For instance, how does a phobeya enter a planetary system without perturbing the other bodies there? We know it has normal gravitation. How does it pass so close to its prey - right inside Roche's limit, even - and not raise as much as a tide? The favoured explanation is that the phobeya counterbalances its gravitational influence by directing powerful magnetic fields at the bodies in its vicinity. The same mechanism, if aimed at the sun, might also account for

the phobeya's prodigious speed and dirigibility. This theory has not been properly tested, since the requisite instruments are always rendered useless during an attack."

"And what is its fascination with *civilisations*? It's only a mindless beast after all, isn't it?"

"So we presume. Yes, you are right. Buildings, manufactured artifacts of every kind - what sort of metabolism do they support that cannot be satisfied with natural rock and metal? And people, too. But perhaps the ingestion of people is only incidental. A phobeya once ate a civilisation whose entire population had fled."

"A 'vegetarian meal' for a change, eh, Luminaire?"

"Perhaps."

"And how do you think the phobeya will 'fare' - ha ha! 'with us?'"

"Everyone should keep his anti-liquidising equipment in good order. If the defence forces do a good job there is every chance the phobeya will give up and go away. Like all simple animals it doesn't like to meet trouble."

"Thank you, Luminaire, and I think we can take it as read that the phobeya will not reach Alzarus II without meeting a lot of *stout* resistance from our defence forces! And to assure us of that I shall be speaking next to Lieutenant - Commander Pat Walls of renowned Z Squadron. But first, here is some appropriate music; the Alzarean Polic Force Male Voice Choir and *A New Way to Build a Nation*."

With a jarring chord the lusty massed voices gave forth, and someone turned the sound point down.

Aumk was unwilling to broach his business with Moss in the hearing of the two oldsters sitting opposite him. He glanced towards them. The one with the white fringe beard looked straight back at him and grinned.

"Crap."

"What?"

"This phobeya business. Don't you realize what it is?" He leaned closer. "It's an exercise in terror. You know what the word phobeya means, don't you? It's an ancient work for *fear*. That's the whole point of it. Nothing like hysterical fear of a common enemy as a nation-building ploy. Makes people huddle together and form a common identity."

The other oldster, clean shaven and with scrubby white hair cut straight across the top of his head like a brush, chuckled. "You've got to admit it builds up the right atmosphere. The tense populace. The gallantry of the defence forces. The *woosh* of war cruisers taking off from the spaceground."

"And the grounding of civil liners to make sure everybody stays put and endures it all."

"I don't see how the government could whistle up a moving planet," Aumk commented.

"Planet? Rubbish. You don't swallow that gunge about magnetism counteracting gravity, do you? The thing's hollow. It's just a planet-sized skin with a spacedrive."

"you two don't sound much like loyal Alzareans."

The bearded old man gave a huffing laugh deep in his chest.

"This is my fifth colony, I've been around."

Turning to Moss, Aumk said, "Could I see you outside for a minute?"

Moss glanced briefly at the other two. "Okay." Outside, Aumk asked him, "Do you think the phobeya's a stunt?"

"Oh, don't take any notice of those two. They're crazy."

"How many people can ride in that blip ship of yours?"

"The blip ship? That's only for sunjumping."

"It'll get us off the planet, won't it?"

"You forget I'm supposed to like excitement. I came here to escape the boredom of modern life."

"You like the idea of being turned into goo? You're not scared?"

Moss deliberated. "Yes, I'm scared. All right. The ship will hold four. But we'll be in trouble if we're caught."

"We should worry," Aumk said, sighing with relief. "I want to bring Cera. I'll go and get her now. Where shall I meet you?"

"I'll collect Moiry too," Moss mumbled. "Meet me at the club at five. Are we doing the right thing, do you think?"

"Let me tell you something. The anti-liquidiser in your apartment is there mainly for psychological value. It hardly works a damn, except perhaps to delay liquefaction for a few minutes. Unless the defence force can turn this phobeya thing aside, by bombing it or firing beams at it or whatever it is that they do, then everybody here has had it. My room tells me that on past experience we've one chance in three."

"Is that so? Well, I'll see you at five."

Cera greeted him with the same glassy stare she had exhibited on the vidplate. "Come in quick," she whispered breathlessly.

She slammed the door behind them. Her windows were sealed and tuned opaque. The lights were turned low. There was loud hum in the air; the anti-liquidiser was on full blast, filling the apartment with its chill vibrations.

Before he could speak she had flung herself at him, her voluminous breasts straining desperately against his body, her arms clinging round his neck in an unbreakable hold.

"Oh God!" she said tremulously. "Oh, I'm so scared! Oh, quick, quick!"

Tearing at his clothing, her face slack with - with what? Terror? Arousal? - she dragged him to the couch. *Panic sex*, Aumk realized as, out of the kindness of his heart, he decided to humour her. He had heard of this sort thing.

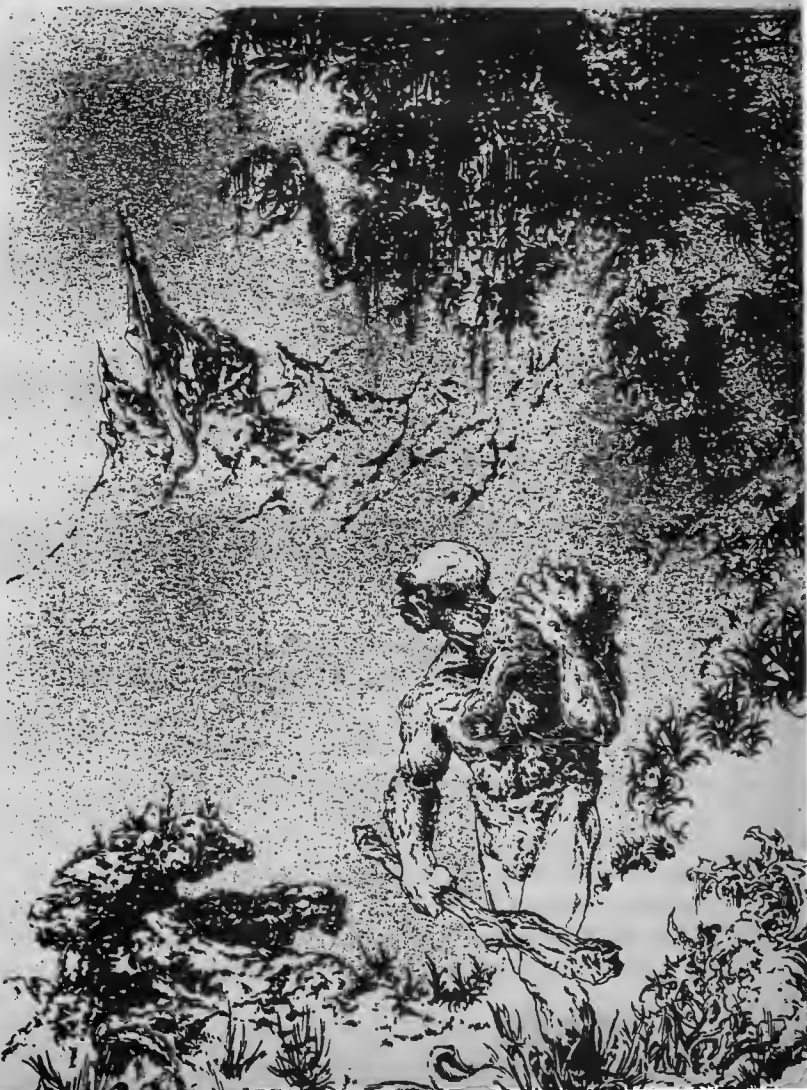
But he hadn't known it could be so persistent an aphrodisiac. Two hours later she was still pummelling and rolling on him, still uttering transports of dread. He pushed her off and stood up.

It was gone four.

He began pulling his oversuit on. "Listen," he said, "I've arranged for us to escape." Quickly he explained about the blip ship. "We're meeting Moss at five."

"A blip ship? Oh no! I couldn't go sunjumping. It's dangerous."

He waved his hand, exasperated at her denseness. Sunjumping consisted of diving straight at the sun, then



zipping, on manual control, into subspace for a pre-timed *blip* or fraction of a second. If the manoeuvre was judged correctly the blip ship emerged into free space on the other side. Otherwise it either plunged into the photosphere or was still inside the sun on coming out of subspace.

"We won't be sunjumping," he argued patiently. "We're only getting off Alzarus before the phobeya gets here."

"The phobeya! Oh God!"

"Get ready, then. We're going to Moss's club now."

Her voice fell to a whisper again. "No, No. Can't go. I'm an Alzarean. Got to stay ... got to trust the government."

She sat on the couch, leaning on her hands, head hanging, bare breasts dangling. She was in a state of psychotic shock, Aumk realized.

"Get dressed," he ordered, and threw her oversuit at her. Dumbly she shook her head, clinging to the couch with clawlike fingers. When he moved towards her she suddenly jumped up and ran into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

If he was to take her it would be by force. He didn't think he could manage it alone.

He stood perplexed. Moss. Moss would help.

It was some distance to the club. Outside, Aumk called a streetrider from a sidewalk post. As it wheeled him through Alzarus City he saw that the street were less quiet than formerly. Heavy waggons trundled at speed through the main concourses, heading for the spaceground. The struggle with the phobeya was hotting up.

Unbidden, the streetrider switched on its public service soundpoint. "Here is the latest news on the Phobeya," the public service announced. "Word is that the phobeya's speed of approach has increased in the last few hours. All defence vessels are converging on the ravenous beast in a final effort to deflect it from its horrendous intentions. Newly manufactured weaponry is being flung into space at an accelerating rate, and Lieutenant-Commander Pat Walls, spokesman for the Defence Forces, says the phobeya will shortly feel 'as though stung by the phobeyan equivalent of a sand wasp', which for the benefit of our newly come citizens, can kill and elephant stone dead in less than a second. To show the unperturbable spirit of Alzareans at such times, here is a song released only this afternoon by that fabulous popular group, *The moaners*."

For a few seconds before cancelling the soundpoint, Aumk listened resignedly to a repetitious, rhythmic ditty sung to a droning accompaniment:

"It sucked us up, it sucked us up,

We were sitting on Alzarus and we couldn't get away,

Everything went funny in a watery way,

It sucked us up, it sucked us up..."

At least, he thought, it made a change from endless patriotic marches.

The premises of the Tedium Club were located in one of Alzarus City's garden suburbs. Behind a screen of

frond trees stood a meeting house that resembled nothing so much as a sports pavilion, from which one might imagine emerging, suitably attired, a team of cricketers or dartists. Moss Carsinger walked to and fro upon the veranda, twiddling his moustache and glancing anxiously at the sky.

Aumk leaped in distraught fashion up the steps. "I can't make Cera come! Help me take her, Moss!"

Thoughtfully Moss gazed at him. "Have you taken a look overhead lately, Aumk?"

For most of the day the sky of Alzarus II showed as a white haze that warded off the worst heat of the dazzling Alzarus sun. In the late afternoon, when the angle of incident sunlight fell to sixty degrees from the vertical, it suddenly cleared and became an azure blue in which a handful of stars twinkled. Previously, the white haze had hidden what Aumk now saw when he raised his eyes.

It was like a large pale moon, riding serenely aloft, smooth and featureless. Of the Defence Force that presumably was in action against it there was no sign. Who at this distance would see, with the naked eye, a space fleet that had pitted itself against a planet?

Aumk's kness nearly buckled. He heard Moss calling Moiry to come out of the pavilion. She appeared at the entrance: a lanky, wide-mouthed, bony-nosed girl. She was just the type to be chosen as consort by desperado Moss - loud-mouthed, uninhibited, and except for her admiration of physical bravery, completely empty-headed.

"I don't think there's time to go back for your girl," Moss was saying gravely. "If she passed up the chance to come along, that's her business."

"No, I don't think there is, either," Aumk stuttered. "Look!"

The phobeya was swelling as it darted in closer to Alzarus II. Its magnified surface was no longer smooth, but mottled. Suddenly, with unbelievable swiftness, it claimed a third of the sky, dimming the landscape beneath. The phobeya swung, tilted and Aumk saw the four satellites strung about it like four beads, magically maintained in the equatorial plane. While from the southern pole there issued a vague *something* that was shining like ice out in space... Moiry started to scream.

"Come on!" Moss shouted. "The ship's over here!"

Panic was a snapping dog at their heels. Moss ran round the side of the pavilion and across a lawn, making for a warehouse-like shed that was coloured rose-pink to blend with its surroundings. Aumk and Moiry had caught up with him by the time he pressed his thumbprint to the lock.

The door slid open. But instead of stumbling inside, they suddenly stopped in shock. Something had changed. The air sparkled, as if it had become crystalline. The landscape seem on the verge of altering. The outlines of buildings flowed, at first almost imperceptibly, then more visibly... a dragging feeling invaded Aumk's internal organs...

Moiry gave another shriek. The tower of a distraught house was dissolving into an abstract network of lines, a blueprint which then floated off through the air. A vanishing, tumbling skein.

"We're being liquified!"

Moss in the lead, they ran into the cool of the hangar. "Quick for God's sake, before the ship goes soggy!" Aumk shouted, only to become aware that all three of them were babbling, none listening to the others.

Moss Carsinger's blip ship, which he loaned to the Tedium Club of a partnership basis, lay attached to a launching rack. Not much larger than many a private air flier, it had the compactness of a racer. Curved aerofoils, for handling in the atmosphere, sprouted like a bee's wings from the upper part of the ovoid body, and in Aumk's imagination seemed already to be drooping. As they crowded the small cabin and flung themselves into chairs, wire-foam straps endolded the three. "No time for clearance," Moss, in the pilot's seat mumbled. The roof curled back, and with a surge of power, they shot into the air.

Under the looming phobeya the blip ship skated through the newly sparkling atmosphere - a diminutive speck seeking to escape from a bloated spider. Then it broke free of the dissolving whirlpool, soaring to the edge of space.

"We were lucky!" Moss gasped. "We only caught the onset of the attack. If we'd got the juice at full intensity —"

Anxiously he inspected the palm of his hand. Fleeing the phobeya, the blip ship sped off through the void.

In her apartment in Alzarus City, Cera's crescendo of terror reached its climax when the anti-liquidiser unit

lost its shape, let out a mangled burp in place of its usual steady hum, and flowed in a treacly lump to the floor.

The apartment began to collapse, and Cera, in concert with the rest of the population, let out a primal scream.

Her scream seemed endless. It became a sustained high singing note that was like part of the dissolving process itself. For by now everything was flowing and disappearing into the brilliant, crystalline air. Cera ceased to be properly aware of her body. She was only aware, all around her, of objects of all kinds flickering in and out of existence as the phobeya juice dissolved them released its hold momentarily, and dissolved again.

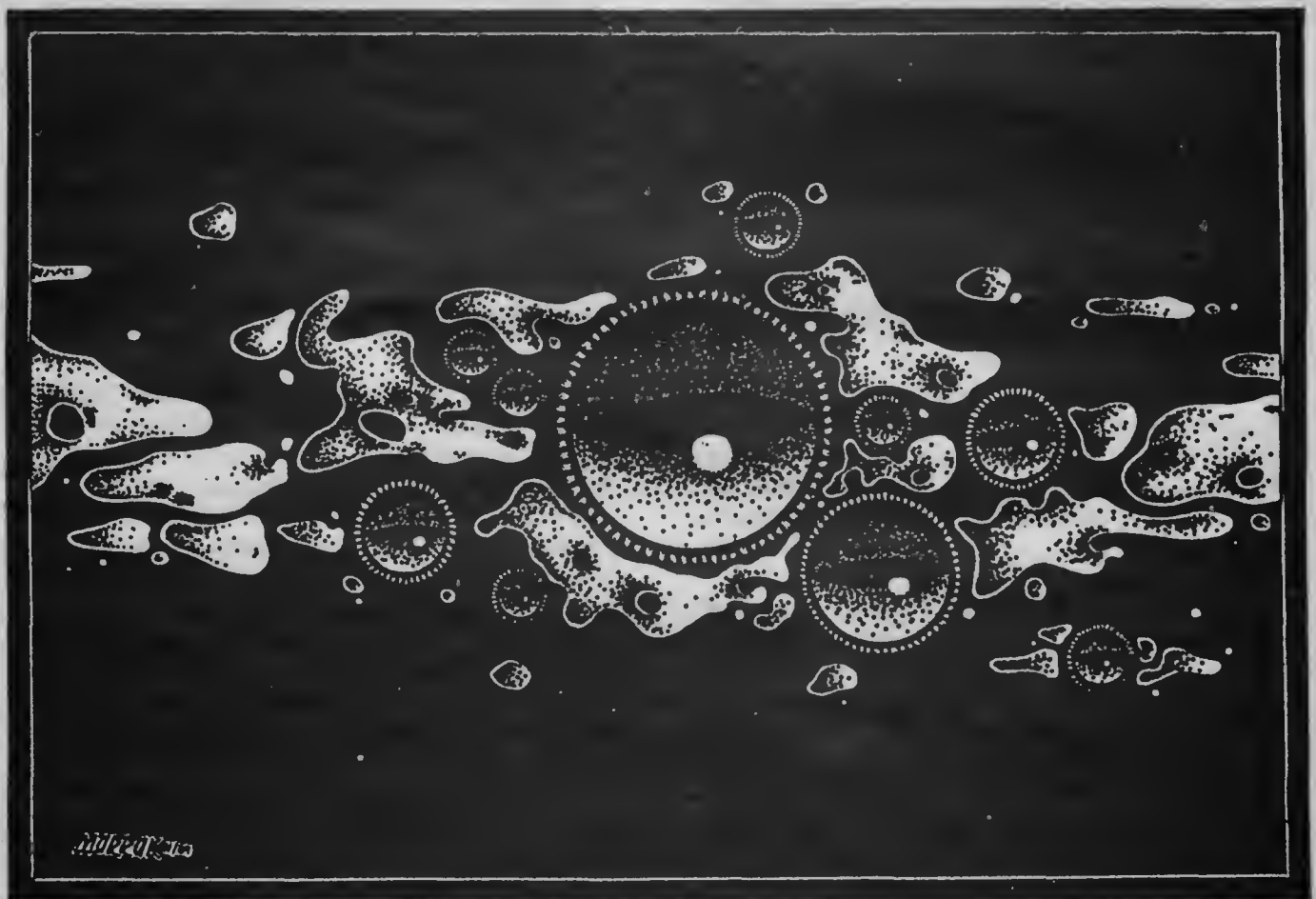
The ascent began.

Buildings, people, vehicles, domestic articles, articles of business, articles of pleasure, machine networks, all robbed of identity, all merging, whirling, occasionally visible against the sun as if etched on glass, all were floating upward. And now, strangely, fear itself seemed to be surpassed, even though consciousness of some kind remained. There was only floating, floating, floating...

For some minutes Aumk and Moiry watched in fascination as the phobeya receded behind them, quickly becoming a star among stars. "Oh God, that was close," groaned Aumk.

"Well that's the end of one brave colony, all right," Moss said cheerily. Never mind. Just have to start again somewhere."

Then Aumk noticed that Moss, still seated at the controls, seemed additionally tense. He also noticed



that the Alzarus sun loomed unnervingly large on the forward screen.

"Where are we going?" he queried.

"To jump the sun," Moss said in a peremptory tone, as of one forced into stating the obvious. "This is a blip ship."

"But we're not using it as a blip ship," Aumk said raggedly, feeling that the hammer of unreason was pounding at the inside of his skull. "We're only using it to get away..."

"Sunjumping's all she does, old man. Take her up and she makes a dive. It's automatic."

"Then override —"

"Can't do that. Feature of design. You could chicken out if you could override, you see. So the steering's locked till after the jump. But not to worry. I've done this a score of times."

Aumk fought his returning hysteria. Moiry let out a dubdud wail. The blip ship was accelerating to the large fraction of the speed of light it needed to enter subspace. Moss flexed his finger, sighing with anticipation. His hands went to the controls. The few readings he was permitted rose before him in glowing green figures. Judgement as to when to jump was entirely his, though in deference to his passengers he threw in the largest allowable dollop of calculation from the board. The Alzarus sun swelled until it exceeded the limits of the forward screen. Sunspots became visible. The photosphere was mottled with storms and prominences. And still it grew.

Moss jumped.

On the screen, blackness.

In the blip ship, unendurable waiting.

It was typical of the Tedium Club's perversity that the blip ship used the *wrong* other-spatial mode. Interstellar liners used hyperspace, in which the distance between A to B could be traversed at many thousand times the speed of light. The blip ship used subspace, where distances took *longer* to traverse than normal space. The sunjumping *blip* became elongated from less than a second to a full five minutes.

Moss had once explained to Aumk that the mode had been chosen intentionally to introduce an extra dimension of *suspense*, of *uncertainty*.

"Will it be alright?" whispered Moiry.

Moss shrugged. "Sure it will. Maybe."

"Cera," Aumk mumbled to himself. Only now, staring at the darkness on the screens, did it strike him what had happened to her. A montage of poignant images invaded his mind. Her young face, her good nature, her enormous breasts which he remembered with his hands as much as with his eyes, the sweet soft cleft between her legs...

So while moiry wrung her hands in anguish, and Aumk sobbed his sudden grief, Moss Carsinger passed the time in his own way. Putting his feet up on the control board, he pulled a comic book out of the glove compartment and settled down to read.

The minutes to re-emergence flickered by on the blip clock. Aumk was drying his eyes as the count approached zero. He clenched his fists, clenched his teeth, and put fists and teeth together.

Blip. The rear screen exploded with light.

"I told you!" cheered Moss. "We made it!"

But there, on the forward screen among the longed-for display of stars, was a disk the size of an orange. The blip ship was making such speed that it rapidly swelled to the size of a melon, yellow and mottled. Circling it, moving with slow, regular motions, were what appeared to be a family of pips.

"*It's another phobeya!*" shrieked Moiry.

Moss flung aside his comic. Thunderstruck, he sat rigid. "Six moons! It's a phobeya sexta!"

Desperately he applied braking force in an attempt to alter course. But the phobeya, which could not have been more than ten kilometers out from the sun, was dead ahead. All he achieved was to ensure that they hit its atmospheric blanket at less than lethal velocity.

"Why should there be *two* of them?" Aumk queried. He received no answer. In a state of dreamlike dismay they found themselves plunging though the atmosphere of the *phobeya sexta*. Lights twinkled and floated on the screen around them. The air was crystal clear, yet it seemed solid, refracting light like a prism.

The blip ship was no longer responding to the controls. Its engine stopped. It sank helplessly down as if through treacle.

Everything became confused for Aumk. He must have lost consciousness, for when he came around the blip ship was gone, and he was standing on yellow sand. Moss and Moiry stood beside him. The landscape was hazy and seemed to have ghost shapes flitting in it, but the sky was a clear blue-white.

So this is what the surface of a phobeya looks like, he thought. What will happen next? He felt no fear. He seemed to be under a kind of anaesthesia, a sedation of the ability to be surprised or afraid.

Then he felt Moss touch his arm. "Do you see that up there?"

Aumk followed his pointing finger. Something was approaching terribly swiftly in the blue-white sky. It swelled, darkening the landscape. It swivelled. It was a vast sphere, attended by four small bodies...

"*It's the phobeya tetra!*" Moss shouted in his ear. "Know what I think's happening? They're not separate species after all! They must be male and female!"

As seen externally, the mating dance of the phobeyas made a majestic spectacle. The massive spheres swept in close, receded, swept in close again. The ten moons combined in a common, complicated, orbitally commensurable pattern, mathematically precise in their ratios.

Subjectively, the experience was somewhat different, Aumk, dissolved in the phobeya's juice, did not know that the copulation lasted two hundred hours. He had all but lost his identity. He was vaguely aware of being whirled about, of being flicked in and out of existence at the behest of the elaborate tides raised by the dancing moons - what mysterious process did those gyrating moons control? He could not have guessed that for the male *phobeya sexta* the solvent juice was not only digestive saliva but also semen. But he did experience the climax, when a huge whirlpool was gathered at the southern pole and sent gouting through space to wash

satisfyingly over the *phobeya tetra*.

Regaining his senses some time after being thus ejaculated, he found himself standing, naked in a plaza. Around him were other people - some clothed, others naked like himself. He knew this plaza. It was one of several in Alzarus City. But wait a moment. Shouldn't that road lead to the left, not to the right? And weren't those buildings, though familiar, wrong? As if they had been blended or jammed together with other *different* buildings...?

The flat roof on the Defence Command Centre, for instance, now had a baroque scenic tower built on it!

The sky was whitish blue. He was looking around for Moss and Moiry when suddenly the public address system crackled and a cordial, if brazen, voice came from soundpoint.

"Welcome!" it said. "Welcome, especially, to those who have lately arrived from Alzarus II. In case you do not yet realize it, you are now upon a *phobeya*, and this is to be your home world."

A pause, while those in the plaza stirred. "Many of you will formerly have been very much afraid of *phobeyas*," the voice went on "You will now discover that they bring not death but a new exciting life! You are bound to have many questions, so I will try to inform you of the situation as briefly as I can. Yes, it is that a *phobeya* is a living creature. Yes, it is true, in a sense, that we are its food, But there any semblance to the dread idea of being eaten ends, for the *phobeya's* digestion is for us a benign process, involving not destruction but an endless series of delightful changes!"

"You have already found that liquefaction is a reversible process. The reason for this is that the solvent juice does not destroy what it absorbs but is able to precipitate it again, like water dissolving and precipitating a crystal of sugar. You will, in fact, be dissolved and precipitated many times during your existence here, and you will learn that it is something to look forward to rather than fear.

"One thing you have to get used to is the recombinant nature of our solvent atmosphere. To take again the case of crystals dissolved in water, if the water is then shaken or stirred the precipitated crystals will be arranged somewhat differently from before. It is the same here, except that spontaneous migration of material also occurs through the fluid. The solvent is, however, a miraculously integrative substance, working on a principle of affinities, of like finding like — I assure you it will bring much variety into your lives!"

So that's why the buildings are jumbled up. Aumk thought to himself. He continued listening as the voice went on: "From time to time, as has just occurred, our *phobeya* has intercourse with other *phobeyas*. This introduces fresh innovations into our existence — often in quite unexpected ways! Finally, I hope you will not be disappointed to learn that you must stay here on the *phobeya* from now on. I assure you that your old life on dead planets will soon come to seem unutterably dreary! You will come to share with me the belief that to dwell upon *phobeyas* must be the natural destiny of all mankind.

"Many transformations await you. So welcome again to your new and surprising life!"

All around him Aumk saw evidence of vast relief. People were smiling, people were laughing. And he

laughed as well.

He had fled from Alzarus city to the sun, he had crashed onto a *phobeya sexta*, he had been sprayed onto a *phobeya tetra*, only to land, in the end, back in Alzarus City, to the news that there had been nothing to fear after all! What a joke!

He recalled the words of Luminaire Academician Zeikoss. What was the real nature of the *phobeya*? How did its inhabitants benefit its metabolism, yet in a way that did them no harm? In due course, this would no doubt become clearer.

And now, stepping shyly across the square towards him, came the best news of all.

"Cera!"

He shouted the name. He ran to meet her, and she, too, hurried her pace. And then, yards apart, they both stopped and stared.

Like Aumk, Cera was naked. But there was something strange about her body. If one let one's gaze travel down from her sweet face, one encountered first her rounded shoulders and gorgeous full breasts. Then, after lingering for a while on her plump nipples, one came to her flat, youthful belly.

But below that, there hung a finely shaped penis and scrotum that Aumk recognised as his own.

Cera likewise wore a gaze that was passing, with glazed disbelief, the length of Aumk's body. He looked down to inspect himself. He saw past a muscled chest sparsely matted with hair, past belly and hips — which, though familiar, were possibly slightly wider than before, or was that his imagination? - to a gingerish bush, fluffed around a sweet glistening slit, which he also knew well.

The same thought had also caused Cera to lower her face and examine herself. At length her eyes met his. Was that shock he saw in her face? Utter bewilderment? Or was it a mingling of horror and delight, producing a sense of anticipation that to tell the truth, was already making him tingle?

Bashfully, he spoke. "Well," he said. "I guess you could call it a new way to build a nation."

Sean Bayley

Currently studying mathematics at St. John's College, Oxford, co-author of the *Phobeya* is his father, Barrington Bayley, who on and off has been writing science fiction since the 1950s. Between 1970 and now he has published thirteen novels, of which *'The Soul of the Robot'* is probably the best-known, and two story collections.



Kim Newman

D & D

A unicorn got into the 'combs and charged around First Level for a couple of days. It wandered through one of the disused entrances we were supposed to have sealed up and went bugfuck berserk. We think it was just lost and frightened and trying to get out of the dark. It ran loose at random, battering itself against the walls. It weighed half a ton and didn't stop for anything it could shift out of the way. We lost a few people: Dirty Barry, the Acid Drop Kid, John Doe and an AF, Gax Azedarac. Azedarac was with Charley Emma. I saw the whole thing.

The shorts had been getting up from Second Level somehow and cropping up behind us. Charley Emma was out looking for the stairway, trapdoor or whatever. We were at a multiple crossroads that was down on my chart as Spaghetti Junction when we heard it. What with echoes, we couldn't tell where it was, but it was coming at us. Captain Farnsworth ordered us flat against the walls. Azedarac was too slow or else didn't hear. He was right in the middle of the passage when the unicorn hit him. The horn took him in the side. The beast bobbed its head and tossed him up. He flipped off the horn, hit the roof, and hit the floor. As it passed, the unicorn's hooves struck sparks from the flags.

It didn't look much like the unicorns in *Fantasia*. The horn wasn't on its forehead, but on the end of its nose like a rhino's. The head was sort of horsey, but the rest was more like a buffalo with bubonic plaque. It was covered with open wounds and the hide was messy with black blood. In the 'combs it was more dangerous than a Sherman tank. A crazy chicano officer wanted to go out after it on horseback, picador-style. When the s-and-d team eventually caught up with it they had to take it out with an XM-8 rocket. Colonel Camberwell got an interesting conversation-piece trophy out of that action.

I look at it this way: unlike most combatants, I know what I'm doing here.

The war in Alvern could last forever. The shorts aren't a fighting force to be broken; they're a whole culture to be exterminated. Every man in the combat zones knows that. Alvern Joint Command puts out a regular press release about "the containing action", but deep down

they know too. The war to keep open Fourth Level supply lines, the war to breach Second Level barricades, the war to equip the Alvern Folk for 20th Century campaigning: the little wars, those are the ones we can win. Charley Emma is a forward unit of the map-making division of the US Marine Corps. Not only can our little war be won, it can be won for good. The shorts can drive us out of territory we hold, but they can't take away the maps we've made. After every patrol we can pencil in *terra cognita*.

Anywhere below the Third Level you've got a condition of total darkness. You have to wear IR shades. The shorts don't have anything like that; but don't kid yourself that means they're as good as blind. Plenty of guys get dead that way. There are good reasons why you don't do dope on patrol in the 'combs. Your glowworm stands out like Liberty's Torch. Just the thing they can get a fix on. There's a line that goes Dead, huh? Oh well, there's a lot of that going around. The 'combs pre-exist Alvern's recorded history. They're supposed to have been built by a long-vanished race of demigods, who also stuck the Fastness of High Alvern over the main entrance to their labyrinthine burrowings. Jesus Fuck knows why, I don't. The AF drove the shorts into the 'combs a generation ago. Now the little scumbags want out.

Field officers get quartered in prefabs made out of reinforced cardboard and emery cloth. The last occupant of my cot amused himself by punching fist-sizes holes in the wall above it. The sunlight used to get in and wake me up early. The hole-puncher also left a stack of comic books: *Iron Man* and *Daredevil*. They were less than mint when I inherited them. After circulating around Company Charley Emma for three weeks they fell to pieces entirely. I salvaged the most striking covers and thumb-tacked them over the holes.

This is Captain Farnsworth's third tour of duty. He resents being assigned to the survey squad. He has respectfully submitted to the transfer board that an officer with his combat experience is wasted on god-damn map-making. "Iss like Fah'ns'th wanted shit dump' on his head." The black grunt whose helmet name is

Stranger Here Myself says, "thass jus' in-sane man, in-sane!" Most of the time Charley Emma operates beyond the perimeters. We pull enough skirmishes without Farnsworth taking us out of the way so he can carve more notches. After his fourth request for a transfer out of Charley Emma was turned down, Farnsworth got his Machine together. He had combat grunts transferred in. Mostly guys from his first couple of rides on the merry-go-round. I expected a bunch of hawk deathlovers with higher killcounts than IQs. Everyone out here has stories. Redneck heroes rack up heavy reputations: like Liberty Valance in the Air Cav. or Coffey and T>C> in the Big Red One. That kind is too dangerous to come through more than a few engagements without catching a crossbow bolt in the Adam's apple or an accurately misplaced bullet in the back of the skull.

There are no hotheads in Farnsworth's Machine. They're pretty damn impressive, and chilly like dry ice. You can tell them apart from the rest. They wear IR shades topside. Looking at the world through rose-coloured *etcetera*, you might say. Most Charley Emma grunts to for instant myth helmet names. The machine just has surnames uniformly printed on the breasts of their flak jackets: Drabble, Gagin, Santiago, Browning, Arch. A couple of AF run with them, Nour Hawke and the Carrion Crow. The whole fucking bunch scares me more than the shorts. Like the most military middle management, Farnsworth grew up wanted to be John Wayne. He holds his gut in on the offchance that someone will test his iron stomach muscles by bouncing a fist off of them. He calls his sergeants 'top soldier' and uses cut little catchphrases like "the *hell*, you will", "that'll be the *day*," and, his favourite, "I could *carve* a better *man* out of a *banana*!" Me, my idea of a super-soldier was Ernie Bilko.

We've got a grunt used to be a corporal. A real artist with a flamethrower, and on that account known as the Human Torch. Using a 'thrower in the 'combs is hairy. It's mostly confined space and you get complex cross-breezes. The Torch has all that figured. He's never even taken his eyebrows off with a blowback. He can get more burning time out of a tank of lighter fluid than the boys in supply will admit to. One time Farnsworth asked the Torch if he'd care to join the Machine. He replied: "sorry sir, but I ain't interested in bein' one ol' your asshole buddies." Like I said, he used to be a corporal.

A grunt they call Joe Public told me this:

"Couple of months back we pulled a Fourth Level s-and-d. Was the time Chain Lightnin' cut M-27 loose. Creamed a couple of grunts an' a correspondent for *Rolling Stone*. Psychs figured the shorts got a Conjure Man holed up close. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, was to put him out of the race 'fore he could spook anymore retards. Psychs say maybe only one Klutz in a thousand got the kink in the head that lays him open. But fuck, you can't forget seein' one of our guys flyin' the flag for the shorts. Imagine checkin' out of the 'vern that way. What they tell your old lady? Chain Lightnin'? He's in the bughouse for the roun' trip.

"They gave field comm. to Sergeant Rojek. We had some mean motherfuckers 'long that trip. That crazy longhair calles hisself Charles Manson, allus playin'

Beatles' *Double White*, he was there. N'Gah N'Chenmi, the pather from Detoit. Tobacco Road. Some UN Swede just in from the World, had a name like Christmastime. An' Ki-Ajail. A real AF warrior. Had a body on him like Schwarzenegger. Heavy on that religion they got. Chalked runes on his grenades. Prayed for heap big medicine in his magnum. Shit, long as you keep it clean it'll go off. Word was Ajail'd taken a vow not to get laid 'til he'd offed four hundred ninety nine, shorts. He was in the middle two-twenties. Behind his back, they called him Onan the Barbarian.

'Psychs gave us a bearing on the Conjure Man, an' it paid off. Was this nest of munchkins in a hole. No cover, no nuthin'. A phosphorus grenade would've finished them off, but Manson opened up with 27. They danced and went down so fast it wasn't even funny. Conjure Man bought it quick. Ajail shot the little bastard's eyes out. Was something about keepin' him dead. Manson wanted to drive a stake through his heart but Rojek nixed that. 'Stead, Manson pissed all over the hobbits. Tobacco Road cracked up over that. Said was the funniest thing he ever saw, an' could Manson keep it goin' til he got his instamatic flash fixed. Manson said there was some things you couldn't hold back on an' Tobacco Road busted up again. The Swede threw up green and white. Guess it ain't so pretty first time out.

"Rojek orders us to move out an' Ajail says no. Since he's like the Apache scout we gotta listen. Rojek acts like he can't believe what he's hearin'. It gets real quiet. Scary. You can hear the piss steamin' off of Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, Dopey, Grumpy, Bashful, and Doc. Ajail takes off all his gear an' stacks it on the flags. Buck naked. The only thing he hangs on to is his sword. He talks to it, calls it 'mighty ourmslayer'. An' his schlong gets angry, like he's turned on. Some of the guys really freak. Rojek looks scared. Was like comin' down from a trip an' findin' your house wrecked too. Ajail spiels in Anglic. N'Chenmi raps that speak, an' tells us what's the buzz. "Seems AF ain't never had no real army 'fore we showed up. 'Stead of Chain of Command they got a System. Everyone does what the toughest mother on the block tells them to. An' everyone got a right to challenge that mother if'n they reckon they can take him. Ajail wanted to go one-on-one with Rojek. Nuthin' personal. Just his way of anglin' for a set of stripes. Fuck, we couldn't even laugh at the bastard. Waitin' for Rojek to peel an' get down 'an' boogie with a bayonet like a fuckin' gladiator. We wasn't gettin' nowhere so we scragged Ajail. Don't know who started it. Wasn't me. Wasn't Rojek. Ajail took a couple in the chest an' one in the belly 'thout hardly showin' it. Shit, but he was a sorry sumbitch. Rojek unloosed a machine pistol and totalled Ajail. Was like the AF tried to get up his ass. Rojek just kept on pumpin' like to spread Ajail over the walls. Was fuckin' strawberry jam time.

"When it was all over we hightailed it back. N'Chenmi got us through. Damn if that spade didn't save our skins. Rojek was out of it. Few days later he pulled a transfer to the Slough. No one seen him since. I heard tell he drew a fatal. Me, I've started seein' AF around the compound with tattoo stripes. Hell, even brass. That stuff 'bout 'the integrity of the human race' is a bucket of horse lemonade. They ain't no nice guys!"

When the war got started the magazines ran a lot of features on US cultural imperialism in Alvern. The photojournalists got cover images: noble savage warriors quaffing coke from cans, a jukebox in a Dassaré tavern, the first crosscontinual half-breed. There's been a lot less of that since Alvern became a UN show. We've had a lot of nationals through the Shimmer lately. Most get deployed in the other combat zones. They say we could never have made any headway in the Slough of Despond if it weren't for the British and Japanese presence. Jaycee was on the point of instituting a policy of saturation bombing, rendering the marshes uninhabitable. Now it looks like the Kobayashi-Hoare stragem has cleared the shorts out. The nips aren't doing so badly against the indigenous reptiles either. Personally I put that down to trace effects of those Godzilla movies. Every Japanese kid wants to grow up to be a fighter pilot so he can blast fire-breathing fucking dinosaurs to bits.

Titular c-in-c of all forces in Alvern is Baron Sanael, the Guardian of the Gateways, Marshal of the Fastness. But Joint Command is running this war, and word is Jaycee has been sewn up by Generals Harry Madison Frawley, Bub Thursday and Richard Melbourn Daven-try. The key to containing the shorts in the 'combs is the Fastness of High Alver, and that is now, and is likely to remain, under US jurisdiction. Likewise the compound. Inevitably, the only Jaycee concession has been to the Russians. We have Red Army down on the Fourth Level. Not quite a self-contained outfit, but I imagine that's the general idea. I get on okay with their topside liaison, Lieutenant Fedor Romanov. He's around the compound a lot. One time he was with us on a floating three-day party in Dassaré. He tells me that his chances of advancement are non-existent. He is discriminated against for sharing his patronymic with the late Czar.

On the whole the grunts don't pay much attention to the AF combatants. At first it's interesting to see a people who until recently used glaives and caltrops switching on to hardware that can ejaculate three hundred chips of death a minute. But after a while a sort of disgust at their epic dullness sets in. Their culture is based on painfully long ballads in which infallibly mighty heroes cleave endless dwarven skulls in twain. That's about all the AF responded to. Dealing with them is like teaching a class of unpleasant, slightly retarded and extremely blood-thirsty kids. It's difficult to work up that much interest in them. But Unorna of Unorn changed that.

Unorna of Unorn is dark-skinned and dark-haired, four foot eleven, bears a striking resemblance to Jane Russell in her prime (with just a touch of Julie Newmar), and is the rank equivalent of a full colonel in the US services. The Runic name's pretty, but banal when you understand it — they just named her after her birthday, second day of the second month. Would you call you kid February the Second? She comes from Far Alvern, and has as little in common with the Anglic-speaking High Alverns as we do. Her Culture is older than their's, and deceptively a shade more literate. They have an insanely complex religion which is reckoned to be inexplicable to anyone but their Avatar and his elite priesthood.

I guess we've always know there were woman warriors in Alvern. We just never thought Jaycee would put them in the combat zones. Unorna is the first. The alliance between High Alvern and Far Alvern is shaky, and she turns out to be the Avatar's niece. Less social and sexual status is placed on the maternal functions in Alvern culture, and so the AF find it strange that the breasts of their commanding officer are such a favourite topic of conversation. One time, a sergeant tried to cop a feel. He tipped the scales at one ninety five and had recently been cited for "extreme courage and resourcefulness in the face of the enemy." Unorn broke his back in three places.

To the embarrassment of Jaycee, Unorna persists in the Alvern warrior custom of shortlived affairs with the bravest of her comrades. The theory is that some portion of the hero's prowess is passed on with each emission. For the most part she had taken her lovers from the AF contingent, but one celebrated grunt distinguished himself in her sight. He was the envy of the compound but returned white and bleeding the next morning. He didn't want to talk, but when pressed described the experience as "like screwing an industrial vacuum cleaner. With teeth." They say Unorna took all his spirit, because the next time he caught a foot and half of killing iron.

Yosemite Sam has this routine:

"Well Tonto, the Indians have got us surrounded. It looks like we're finished!"

"What do you mean *we*, *kimosabe*?"

"IPSIT?"

"Pronounced 'eyesight'."

He was a civilian. He had on a tropical suit out of *A Night in Casablanca*. On his ID was the word IPSIT, also his name: Dr Adam O. Cowley. We were sitting by the pad at the Dassaré LZ, waiting to be stowed on a Chinook and airlifted out to the Fastness. I'd been picking up a crate of theodolites fresh through the Shimmer. The intake was milling about, wonderstruck and shit-scared. They were getting the Lecture, the one that begins "welcome to Analog Arizona." Cowley and I were both old Alver hands and we naturally gravitated together.

"Uh huh. Acronym?"

"Institute of Psi Techniques. It's also a sort of test to spot potential talents. You flunked."

"Fuck. What do I lose?"

"Not much. Talents are rare. In any case, I don't see any reason why an undiscovered Talent should know that *p s i* is pronounced 'psi', unless he's Greek scholar or read it in a magazine like everyone else. It's more like a crossword puzzle clue than a real sign of cognition. It was not my idea."

"You a psych?"

"No, parapsychologist. I have a roving commission from IPSIT and Jaycee. I'm compiling a report on the military usage of Talents."

"Conjure Men?"

"Conjure Men, psychs, whatever. Talents."

I told Cowley the story about Chain Lightnin'. He'd heard it before.

I wasn't especially surprised.

"That would be Borden. Induced paranoia. He had normal combat fatigue and was habitually using hallucinogens. The dwarf Talent pushed him over the edge. Actually one of the very few confirmed cases of psi warfare."

"Most grunts are more scared of Conjure Men than anything else the shorts have."

"They shouldn't be. The dwarves are less intelligent than us. Their Talents specialise in mental domination abilities, but they can't hope to find their way around our minds. In order to be open to their influence you have to be as near total collapse as makes no difference."

"So Chain Lightnin' was about to crash out on his own?"

"Very probably. It's only because Alvern culture places more emphasis on mysticism than ours that psi tradition has risen here. We have Talents back in the World who could knock the socks off anyone out here. There's a girl who can stop your heart by an exertion of willpower."

"Sheesh. That sounds heavy."

"Maybe, but she needs a quarter of an hour without any distraction to work up to the push. It's not feasible to use a Talent like that in a foxhole situation."

"We have an AF in maps who is supposed to be a hotshot seer Q'leil Tambbo. He can feel which way the passage will go."

"But not consistently, I'll bet. AF Talents we've tested with Rhine Cards have only a seventy percent success rate. And that's under experimental conditions. In the field the figures fall off considerably."

"Yeah."

"And that can get you killed. A directional mike is much more reliable. Perhaps the AF do have a greater natural psi ability that we do, but their Talents are handicapped by the cultural climate. Take their battle wizards. Raw pyrokinesis, mostly. Devastatingly effective to begin with, but invariably they burn out. Why? Because they think it's all magic. They accept their power as mysterious and leave it at that. They never test themselves, try to get their limits. So they can't use their Talents properly. If they don't fry, they vegetate. They've been surrounded by centuries of mystification and pointless ritual. The psi faculty is like any other physical capability: if you don't exercise it properly, it atrophies. Since they found out that we can fight and heal with technology better than they can with magic, the AF have been junking their wizards. In a few years, they'll all be mutes."

"And that's the end?"

"No. There'll be a new generation of Talents and IPSIT will see they're cultivated properly. They may be useless in war, but that doesn't mean there are no applications. We just have to forget about magic. That's the big step. It will be *the* big thing to come out of our contact with Alvern. The psi revolution. It's already started."

Christmas Day. I hear they made a big deal out of it in Dassaré, like Chinese New Year in San Francisco, but I didn't go. I could have got a pass, but I put myself on standby and hung around the compound instead. The

Four-Forty-Fourth Smoke Generating had pumped CS gas into the lower levels for a week and the shorts were expected to be quiet over the holiday. There was no reason I should be needed. I just didn't want to spend my Christmas being ripped off by licensed brigands on the Street of Many Taverns. Not to mention the roughs of Cutpurse Alley or Sandbaggers' Boulevard.

I got up late and sat in the sun outside my prefab answering letters from Cathy and my folks. Everyone out here was still talking about the unicorn so I wrote them about that. I didn't mention Azedarac. Around noontime I got together with some of the Charley Emma grunts. Not the Machine, the good guys: Yosemite Sam, Stranger Here Myself, Candy Man, Johnny One Note and the Human Torch. We had ourselves a picnic up on the slopes beneath the Fastness. Candy Man laid a present on us. He had just tapped into a new quality supply and brought a couple of ounces along. The Stranger and him clinched a deal with a cats' cradle handshake. We all had stuff to share. I threw in what was left of the case of Californian wine my folks had sent me. Fedor showed up three parts drunk, clutching a prized box of English Christmas crackers he had traded with a Royal Marine for. We pulled the crackers, freaked on the bangs, and put on paper hats. Yosemite Sam read all the riddles aloud. He wears a Wyatt Earp moustache three sizes too big for him. We all got plastic keepsakes. Mine was a ring too small for my pinky. Candy Man turned Fedor on and the ivan did all the dumb things you do first time out of your skull.

Yosemite Sam finished the cracker material and started into his own repertoire of Classic Campfire Jokes of the Old West: 'And the shepherds tended their flocks by night in the hills around Judea. And the Angel of the Lord came down and said unto them, "move on, this is cattle county!"'

Pfc Kent, the new kid, rolled around with his deck and we played his tapes, mostly late '60s revival stuff — Hendrix, Dylan, Steppenwolf, Aretha Franklin, Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi". "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot." When Kent's slot sounds ran out, the Torch fetched up a guitar. ("Shit," said Yosemite Sam, 'if you're gonna play 'House of the Rising Sun, I'm gonna get me a pump action full of rusty razor blades and top you.'). The Torch was a fair picker. Trad. stuff mostly, "Stack O'Lee and "Barb'ry Allen". We sort of sang along. Fedor came down off the space shuttle and insisted on singing a song of old Russia. Johnny One Note refused to oblige with an Iroquois war dance. A good thing since he was the only one together enough to keep the joints rolling.

Nobody wanted to talk about the war or sex and there isn't that much else out here so we ended up zonked out. There had got to be something wrong with a place where you get sunburn on Christmas afternoon.

You get an instinct. I knew Kent was about to give up. Farnsworth's Machine was overdue. He'd left us measuring out the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant and taken off down Sesame Street. I wish that just once I could meet up with the dorks who get to pick the names. I'd cut Yosemite Sam and Johnny One Note out of Charley

Emma and we'd taken off after the Machine. We found pfc Kent jammed into an alcove, sucking on a joint. He was halfway stoned and scared all down the line. Kent had transferred into Charlie Emma from the Slough. He'd seen some rough actions. We'd been trying to raise the Machine on the walkie talkie, do you copy? Usually Farnsworth was big with all that CB trucker crap but now he was off the air when he shouldn't have been. Asshole. Kent said the captain had left him as rear guard. Smart Fucking Move.

Everything blew up down the passage ahead. Flames blossomed, IR purple. There was a hell of a noise. Shouting, screaming, shooting stuff like that. I told everyone to eat flags, but Kent choked on a lungful of smoke and fell against the wall. I heard the patter of tiny feet. Fuck, shorts coming our way. I humped up on one knee in order to get a good clear shot with a machine pistol. You have to be real careful in corridor warfare, what with ricochets and deadly shards of splintered stone in the air. I know a couple of grunts got blind that way. Or dead. I fired. The new jobs are smooth. It's like squeezing off a water pistol. Two, maybe three, shorts went down. Hooray for our side!

Quiet. I could see a pool of burning oil down the passage. There was something dark lying in it. For a stretch the flags were soot-black and greasy. Johnny One Note and Yosemite Sam had their armalites unslung. They were okay, but Kent was in a bad way. He'd pissed his pants. Slug trails of sweat, snot and spit glistened on his face. Jesus Fuck. He was trying to fix his bayonet. His hands shook. His palms were cut open. One lens of his IR shades was gone, fire mirrored in the other. He finally got his goddamn bayonet to stay fixed.

"Tell Sarge 'This one's for Benny!'" he said, then crashed out. We never found out what that last bit was all about. At the end, Kent wasn't with us. He was back at Fort Worth skewering sacks of straw. Or in Burma with Errol Flynn. He tore off, hurdled the fire and hit the dark. We heard a war whoop for a few seconds. Then he shut off.

"Okay. Single file." I didn't have to tell them to be careful. We advanced dead slow, checking for hidden nasties. The fire was out when we reached there. There was a charred short in the ashes. One of mine. We found Kent a few yards on. Neck broken, throat gashed. A traditional favourite. It's on page three of *Jane's Book of Booby Traps*. A thin wire, taut across the passage at neck height. I used the snippers on it.

Yosemite Sam found Kent's stash. 'He won't be needing it.' I hadn't said anything. "You want I should cut it three ways?"

Farnsworth's Machine was in an uncharred chamber a few twists down the way. They had run into a merry band of shorts and fought it out. The little bastards take ridiculous casualties. It's inevitable when swords go up against guns. But they've got a secret weapon that covers that. They don't care. And there are lots of them. Once they get in close you have problems. Like the Machine.

Farnsworth, Drabble, Arch, Gagin, Santiago, Brown-ing, Whimore, Johns, Mansfield, Ervin, Leatherface, Nour Hawke and the Carrion Crow. Yosemite Sam Said it all. "Shit! Man, that's what I call a fuckin' mess!"

After Farnsworth cashed in they gave me a field promo. Charley Emma came with it. A whole new bunch came into the company to fill out the gap. Intake, mostly. Jaycee is talking purple hearts for the Machine and I've more or less decided to countersign the recommendations when they come through. It doesn't mean shit. My folks are pleased with the upgrading, and I'm salting away a larger salary. Hope I get to spend it.

The new grunts have mixed in. In the 'combs the system of acceptance is different. Every other combat zone you get blooded first time your up against the bad guys. If you come through. Here you can go out on patrol twenty times and not see short. But somewhere along the road you find an in. Just by creeping around scared shitless in the dark. Yosemite Sam, Johnny One Note and the other survivors have become old-timers and they are nearer twenty than thirty. They spend a lot of time spinning horror stories for the fresh fish. But that's wearing off.

We've already had one Shooting Star through Charley Emma. A kid got in a skirmish first time out and had a firebrand shoved in his face. Medics shipped him out



and we all figured that was one grunt wouldn't be around again in a hurry. Two weeks later he was back at the Fastness. They'd saved his sight, but not much else. They call him the Phantom of the Opera. The Phantom doesn't spend much time in the compound. He's found himself a place in the AF camp and only shows when Charley Emma goes out. He's kitted himself with oddments of armour and a metalwork facemask like Magneto in the comics. He carries more firepower than the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, but you can tell he's happier with AF hardware. Swords and knives satisfy his need to be connected by a bridge of iron to dying flesh. The Phantom is kill-crazier than Farnsworth ever was, but he's canny with it. I reckon he's the final evolutionary stage of the Alvern G.I. Joe.

Dear Cathy,

Fuck you and fuck Roger and ...

No:

Dear Cathy,

You say I have changed; I think I have changed too. One soldier I've heard of sent his girl a severed ear and wonders why she does write him anymore. I have not changed that much...

No:

Dear Cathy,

In this war we're all trying to cast ourselves as the good guys" to be part of a heroic tradition. Trying to find something worthwhile in slaughter. The AF already have those kinds of minds. Alvern is not like anything we knew before. We call them extracontinuals, but they might as well be aliens. If all men are brothers, the AF are at best our cousins. They probably could not adjust to peace...

No:

Dear Cathy,

There is a difference between us and the AF. We do the same things in the field; but they do not have to get stoned in order to go to sleep afterwards....

No:

Dear Cathy,

I'm sorry...

No:

Dear Cathy,

I regret to have to inform you that...

No:

Dear Cathy,

I think I will be coming home soon. The company is being broken up. It was like this:

No.

It was like this.

Sixth Level is different. The passages are less corridors than irregular, crazy-paved tubes. There are stretches of natural tunnel. Caverns have been roughly worked into the design. The impression is of a carefully ordered maze breaking down into chaos. Everything is damp. The stones sweat. Moss sprouts in soggy velvet wads. Some of the plants have a puke-coloured glow. It's close down there. After a while you come down with a ball-breaker of a migraine. It's fucking unhealthy as hell.

They'd cobbled together a special squad to go down as a preliminary to the large-scale invasion. Colonel Camberwell told us that we'd be the spearhead of an action that would hit the enemy where they'd feel it most. Our mission was to get accurate intelligence together. We were under Unorna of Unorn, and she brought two Far Alver lieutenants along, Bobbin Swiftshaft and Erk Bloodblade. I had the pick of Charley Emma: Johnny One Note, Stranger Here Myself, Candy Man, the Human Torch and the Phantom of the Opera.

At first it was quiet. Like they say in the movies. A hell of a lot of tunnels converged in a chamber the size and shape of a cathedral. The floor and lower walls were wrought stone, the vaulted roof dripped stalactite spears. The place was empty, and echoed in a way I didn't like. There were signs of habitation. Bones and ashes. The place might be a temple. I put it down on the chart as The Shirley Temple. Let some other schmuck get irritated for a change. We entered with extreme caution. A lot of safety catches clicked off.

"Watch all the entrances. This stinks!"

Shorts started pouring in from all directions. More of the little pricks than anyone had ever seen in one place. They say that all shorts do is eat, shit, fuck, and kill your ass. There were entrances behind moss curtains. We hadn't seen those. Shit! They were singing as they came in. War chants. See also: spooking the enemy. By God, we were good! We opened up and the first wave of shorts never made it into the chamber. The shorts kept coming, pushing their way in through the fallen. One entrance was completely blocked by jammed corpses, wriggling as the bastards behind built up pressure. The front-lines jitterbugged. The purpose of a bullet is to counteract the velocity of whatever it is fired at. It is a stopping weapon. Death is just a welcome side-effect. The stench of cordite and burning meat got up my nose.

"Hey captain," said Yosemite Sam, "Why was the ground all white after Custer's last stand?"

I heard his skull split. A crossbow bolt.

The shorts just kept on coming. The ring of corpses around us advanced with each charge. A few strays came within striking range before getting iced. The Phantom took care of most of those with his left-handed dagger.

Johnny One Note and me had been covering for the Torch while he got the nozzle of his rig tuned. He burned an entire wave back, but a swatch of flame caught a moss quilt. It fell. Bodies burned. I lost some hair. Fire drove us into a corner. Damn. I burned my fingers adjusting the sight of my gunbarrel. My hands were wrung out from recoil. The shorts were coming at us from entrances I couldn't see through the smoke. But the flow

was slowing. They were taking incredible casualties, but we were being beaten to hell. We had losses. I couldn't tell who was standing and who was down.

I covered for Johnny One Note as the Iroquois lobbed phosphorus grenades into the main tunnel. Shorts flailed around on fire. Some blundered into our shots and were knocked of their feet. Dropped swords clattered on flags. We were using guns more like power hoses than firearms.

My forehead stung. I was bleeding from somewhere up there. My shades were filling up with blood. For the first time since I was a kid I had a stitch. I kept telling myself it wasn't a gut wound.

All the shorts who were coming were there. We were ahead of the game. Just Unorna of Unorn was fighting with a crazed, hyperactive grace. She was bending forward to a feline crouch and shearing heads with a longsword. Bloodblade was still standing, swinging a two-headed axe and a spiked mace like indian clubs. The Phantom had also fallen back on bludgeon weapons. He hacked downwards with a broadsword, trampling the dead and dying beneath him.

It had stopped being a battle. The shorts were retreating from their dead, pouring into the central passage. The Torch squirted after them, bringing burning moss down on their pointy little heads. A few shook free and scurried off. Mop up the wounded and the skirmish would be over.

I tried to lean against a wall, but my legs crumpled under me. I wanted my breath back and I wanted the paid in my belly to go away. I pulled off my shades and shook the blood out of my eyes. The fires burned brighter. The cavern was more colourful than I'd expected. There were murals in orange and turquoise. I hoped we'd offed the interior decorator.

Johnny One Note was up and so was the Human Torch. But Yosemite Sam, Stranger Here Myself, and Candy Man hadn't made it. Neither had Blood Blade or Swiftshaft.

My stitch wouldn't go away and I wanted to cry. I found a scratch high on my temple and smeared the flow of blood into my hair. I fished a bandaid out of my pouch, peeled the backing off with my teeth and thumped it over the wound.

The Phantom was down but not yet out, writhing on a carpet of his kills, bleeding from a dozen wounds. He doubled up and his flak jacket gaped open. So did he. A sword had sliced across his back. Deep. I could see yellow bones and pounding organs. Jesus Fuck, I should have been helping that man. He was Charley Emma. He was mine. I hated his insides. His helmet was off. Blood bubbled on his teeth, pouring through where the lips should have been holding it back.

Unorna was singing. A victorious song extemporising on our great herosim. She danced amidst the carnage, braided hair whipcracking. Some fairy godmother you turned out to be, Tinkerbell. She knelt by the Phantom. Her song became a low ululation for the dying hero. The Phantom of the Opera was riding out of history into the pages of legend. Unorna unfastened his dented armour and cast it aside. She cradled him.

Johnny One Note and the Torch stood by, not sure it was over yet. I wanted the Phantom to hurry up and croak so we could get the hell out of that death trap before the shorts came back with reinforcements. They'd have taken us for sure.

Unorna had a small, curved knife. She cut away the Phantom's clothes and laid his ruined body bare. She brushed her hair back and leaned over his stomach. She kissed the wound. He gasped. She was licking the gory patch clean. Her tongue probed.

I felt like I was going to upchuck my intestines.

Unorna sucked. Her hands stroked the Phantom's white skin. She caressed his horror movie face.

"Fucking leave him alone." It was Johnny One Note. She didn't hear. She was taking the spirit of a dying hero into herself.

The Phantom twisted, his hands reaching awkwardly behind him for his back wound, trying to feel the extent of the damage. A bone poked out.

"For Jesus Fuck's sake stop it." Johnny One Note couldn't look anymore. He balled a fist and beat against the wall. I stood up. Unorna outranked me, but I had to assume command before we all got killed.

Unorna cupped the Phantom's balls in her hand. Mine tried to recede into my pelvic girdle. I knew what she was going to do. She dropped the knife and did it with her teeth. Johnny One Note heaved. The Torch looked stoned. The Phantom cried out, and died. Massive traumatic shock.

Unorna of Unorn chewed slowly, little bloodstreams on her chin and neck.

Yosemite Sam had carried a pair of fully workable replica Colt 45s. The kind Doc Holliday used to wear. I had one. I scragged Unorna with it.

It was comparatively neat. She looked surprised, but mostly she looked dead. I had the Torch burn her up. SOP.

We made it back. Then we were in the shit.

Kim Newman

Born 1959 in London, brought up in the West Country. Educated at the University of Sussex (English).

Freelance film/book critic: 'Monthly Film Bulletin', 'Empire', 'Sight and Sound', 'NME', 'Venue', 'The New Statesman',

Short fiction: 'Interzone' (I'm the only writer who is in all of their anthologies), 'Fantasy Tales', 'The Gate', 'Opus', 'Arrows of Eros', 'Sheep Worrying', 'The Year's Best SF', 'White Dwarf', 'The Drabble Project', 'Darklands', 'The Best Horror From Fantasy Tales', 'Shadows Over Innsmouth'.

Novels: 'The Night Mayor' (1990), 'Bad Dreams' (1990) (forthcoming), 'Jago' (distantly forthcoming), 'Something More Than Night' (faint idea).

Broadcasting: 'Kaleidoscope' (Radio 4), 'Meridian' (World Service), 'The Janice Long Show' (Radio 1), 'The Media Show' (BBC 2), 'Cover to Cover' (BBC 2), He has been a regular on 'Box Office' since it started.

He lives in Crouch End, London.

The Conclusion

Andy Sawyer

"Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out."

I loved that sentence. So quiet, so precise, so...final; but it was after I had completed Arthur C. Clarke's *The Nine Billion Names of God* for maybe the tenth time that, with equal and utter finality, the truth of it hit me.

The universe was already in the process of ending.

This was no delusion, I was sure. I was immediately struck by doubts which seemed virtually irrefutable. How on earth could I have suddenly stumbled upon this information, hidden between the lines of a science-fiction story? Wasn't it easier to believe I was crazy? Yet (although I had already forgotten the line of logic which lead me up to it) the deduction was inescapable. Existence as we knew it was shortly due to be wound up. The only problem was, what should I do with the information?

I put down my book and stared out of my window at the London skyline. It was quiet; early morning and the world looked the same. So what now? There was no action I could take which would actually *affect* what was to happen. As far as I could see, I stood no chance of emulating the heroes of my favourite fiction and saving the world. With me, or without me, it would roll on inexorably to its fate. I could do nothing, I supposed; just carry on, waiting. But even as I thought that, a leaden depression descended at the thought of going about my life making plans for a non-existent future — talking to my friends and thinking "You're going to die soon"; catching a glimpse of an attractive woman and having that instant automatic, hopeful lust dampened by the thought there was no chance, no way, and the only bed we would ever share would be the one which the imaginations of morbid poets decked with worms and shrouds. We would be winking out of existence as though we would never have been. Better get myself out of the way as soon as possible than suffer all this! (I remembered reading an article about an alarming increase in suicide: perhaps I wasn't the only one who had noticed the truth...)

No. Despite the fact that I would be totally unbelievably; at best, mocked, at worst, shut away to spend my last moments in the company of lunatics, I had to attempt to warn the world. At least, I felt, humanity could use its

last moments to come to terms with itself, to face the end with some kind of nobility and, so doing, rewrite its history as tragedy rather than farce.

And so, with that warm glow which comes when you feel you are doing something truly altruistic, I set off on my mission to save mankind's collective soul. I got as far down the stairs as the third floor when I realised that I had not yet decided who to contact.

Ben would know. He was probably my closest friend. If I could convince him, we could work together. There would be a lot of work; governments, embassies — whole nations. Christ, I hadn't much time! Running downstairs to the front door of the block I planned what to say, then crossed the street to the call-box. Quivering with excitement, I dialled.

"Ben?"

"Yeah?"

"It's me — listen..."

To give him his due, Ben heard me out. Then he told me a couple of irrelevant anecdotes on the effect of various substances on the brain cells which, coming from someone who use more acid than ICI, set off a reaction which ended up in me slamming down the receiver. Perhaps Ben, who, I belatedly realised, had had similar flashes twice a day at various periods in his life, was the wrong person to contact. My own insights were not artificially induced, I knew — still, some people *would* find them difficult to credit. Picking my teeth with my phone-card, I stared at the telephone in a fever of concentration as outside the kiosk the daily traffic snarled by. I kicked in frustration. Contact the police? No; I could be pretty sure that their reaction would be a somewhat sourer version of Ben's. The Church? Surely they would have, as it were, a vested interest in the end of the world? But none of the signs foretold by religion had happened; looking around me I saw a distinct lack of angels, trumpets and beasts with seven heads and ten horns. Something told me that priests would be harder to convince than policemen. Then how about the Government? I'd never been that interested in politics, but I knew that my local MP was on a fact-finding tour of bars in the Bahamas and in any case would probably view the Apocalypse as a definite sign that the upturn in the economy was just around the corner. No; there was just one possibility...

Two hours later, I was outside the office of a famous TV personality (my mother's favourite). Dressed in my smartest yuppy-uniform, I looked exactly like everyone else scurrying around the building carrying bulging files or disintegrating clipboards from one meeting to another, and it was easy enough to murmur "Hi!" to anyone who looked in the slightest degree like someone who might present an obstruction and immediately wave meaningfully to whoever it was not actually looking in my direction at the time. I checked my watch and adjusted my face to give the impression of a menial junior fractionally late for an appointment it was important to be on time for; knocked and entered in one breath.

There was surprise on His face as He looked to see me standing in the doorway. I began to speak as I entered, avoiding his secretary (who had as little idea what was going on as He had) and addressing myself only to Him. His leather-covered swivel chair had an irritating squeak which I ignored as I concentrated on my prepared speech, trying desperately to convince Him in the little time I had before He would recover from His surprise. As soon as He realised that I was no threat, He listened, nodding, making polite non-committal noises at each point I made. Then, when I paused for breath, He counter-attacked.

I'd seen Him deliver some brilliant hatchet-jobs on the small screen but none to compare with that which He performed on me. I could have been Chancellor of the Exchequer or manager of the England football team — it was sheer brilliance, the way He took my logic to pieces, revealing hidden flaws in basic assumptions that I'd not even thought of questioning, sending my conclusions collapsing like card houses in a earthquake and pointing out the factual errors and shoddy reasoning. I tried to defend myself, but how could I follow where cinema celebrities feared to tread? Oh, He was polite enough about it, scarcely even raising His voice, but each point was hammered home with a gesture of His head and that irritating little squeak from His swivel chair as He moved slightly until eventually, shaking, almost in tears and choking out apologies, I rose and fled.

As I left the building I was in turmoil. Somewhere, deep inside, a voice insisted "You are right, the cosmos is finished", but I tried to ignore it. Dejected, despondent, I crossed the road.

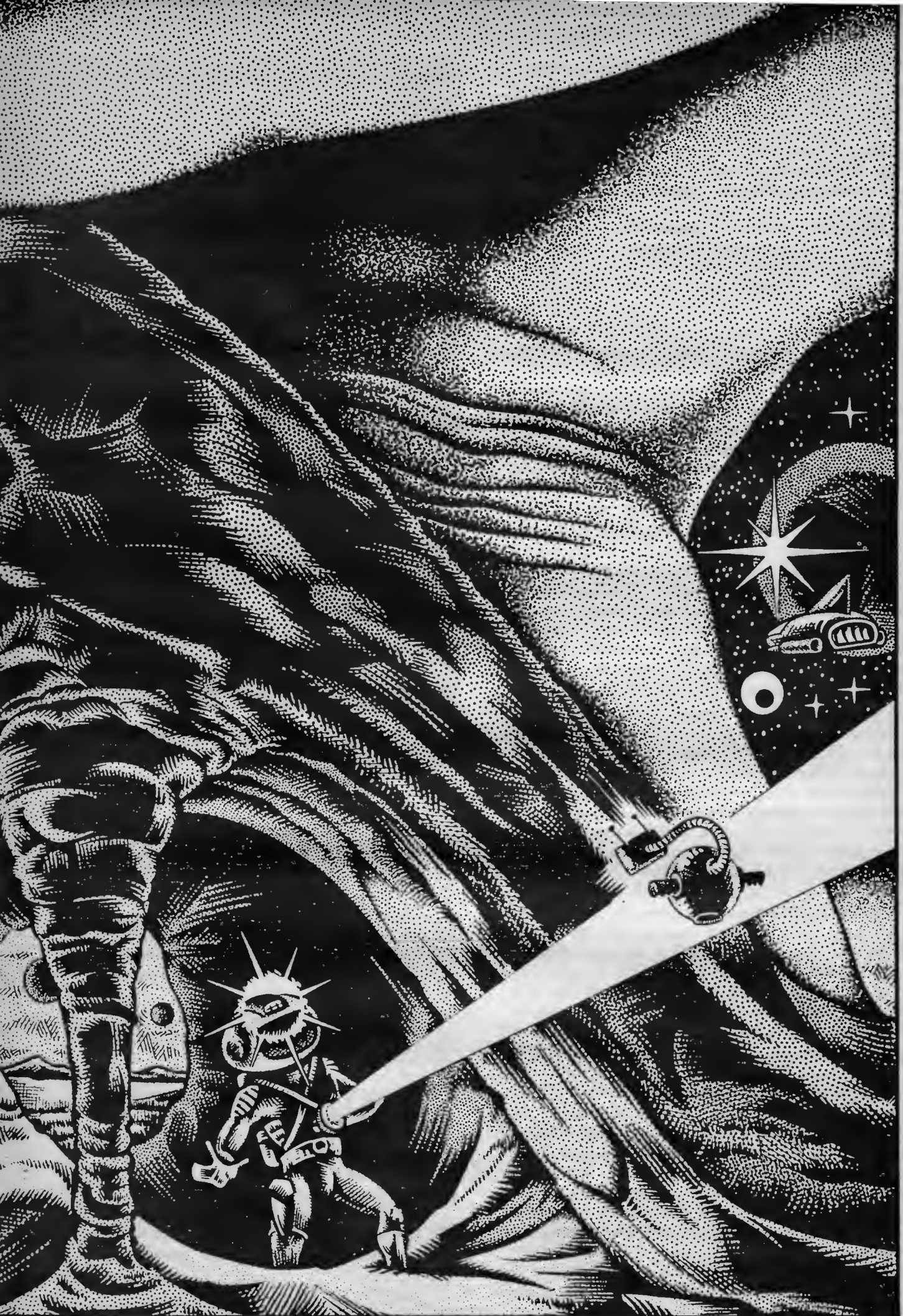
I didn't see the car, nor feel the collision except as a sheet of blinding white light; but as I hurtled through the air the thought crystallised before I hit the ground. To an individual, taken as an individual, there must necessarily be no distinction between the end of the universe and the end of his own individuality. With each death, the universe dies anew. I felt the final negation of the cosmos approaching as the sheet of white light broke up and started to revolve. For an instant, I was supremely conscious of my body and the pain...the lights were points; specks of incandescence becoming increasingly minute. I understood, for the first time, the expression 'seeing stars'. How ironic that I had received this premonition and totally reversed the expression of microcosm and macrocosm.

For overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.



Andy Sawyer

Born in Manchester, moved around the country, and the world, before settling in Cheshire. He now works as a children's librarian in Liverpool. In his spare time, Andy edits 'Paperback Inferno', the paperback review magazine of the British Science Fiction Association, and serves on its committee. He has written a considerable amount of review and critical material for BSFA, Small Press and fan journals, as well as occasional excursions elsewhere but 'The Conclusios' is his first professional fiction sale, with a second story due to be published in 'Digital Dreams'. He is married with two children, and lists among his other interests 17th century drama and pamphlet literature, vegetable gardening and walking.



Film & Video Reviews

Kim Newman

BILL AND TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Directed by Stephen Herek. Starring Keanu Reeves, Alex Winter, George Carlin, Terry Camilleri, Dan Shor, Tony Steedman, Rod Loomis, Al Leong, Jane Wiedlin, Robert V. Barron, Bernie Casey.

Similar in tone to **Time Bandits** but with outrageously witty Californian dialogue instead of pointless shouting, this fast-paced comedy follows **Earth Girls Are Easy** in its yanking of a set of know-nothing Valley stereotypes into a science fictional wilderness. Bill (Winter) and Ted (Reeves), a pair of high school kids who stand to flunk out of school if the flunk their history exam, are visited by Rufus (Carlin), a hipster from the future who arrives in a time machine shaped like a phone box. It appears that life 700 years up the line is a utopian idyll thanks to the great musical achievements of Bill and Ted in the near future, but if they fail that test, the whole of civilisation is in danger. To sort everything out, the boys cram themselves into the phone box, and tour throughout history picking up great figures to come back to the present and help out on the test. With Napoleon (Camilleri), Billy the Kid (Shor), Socrates (Steedman), Sigmund Freud (Loomis), Abraham Lincoln (Barron), Genghis Khan (Leong), Beethoven (David) and Joan of Arc (Wiedlin) in tow — and unlike Dr Who's Tardis, this phone box is smaller on the inside than it is on the outside so it gets very cramped — Bill and Ted cut loose in a Californian mall and make for the school to give their presentation. Along the way, Billy and Socrates cruise for babes, Joan of Arc gets into aerobics, Beethoven discovers the drum machine, Napoleon goes bowling and wins a medal for eating ice cream and Genghis Khan swaps his club for a baseball bat and a

skateboard. With a plot that stands as a definition of stupid, this is nevertheless a high quality entertainment. Bill and Ted, characters created by screenwriters Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon in a stand-up comedy act, are wonderfully played by Reeves and Winter as totally tubed-out dudes proud of their ignorance (they think Joan of Arc is Noah's wife), with attention spans shorter than the lyric of a heavy metal song and a peculiar shared vocabulary and set of mannerisms. The historical characters are mainly in for joke cameos, but the film clicks mainly thanks to the leads, who manage to be endearing in their vacuousness and party-hearty benevolence.

CYBORG

Directed by Albert Pyun. Starring Jean-Claude Van Damme, Deborah Richter, Vincent Klyn, Alex Daniels, Dayle Haddon, Blaise Loong, Rolf Muller.

'You're just one big walking wound, aren't you?' suggests a post-holocaust bimette (Richter) to Gibson Rickenbacker (Van Damme), a 'slinger' who spends this fairly shoddy **Mad Max 2** imitation pursuing a band of 'flesh pirates' led by the villain (Klyn) who slaughtered his family and press-ganged his infant daughter in the hope of rescuing Haddon, the eponymous cyborg, who happens to have exclusive information on a cure for the plague that has been wiping out the survivors of a nuclear war. The woman's touch of screenwriter Chalmers seems to account for the frequent attempts to intersperse the muscle-flexing knife fights with sensitivity as Rickenbacker flashes back to his trauma, is reunited with his long-lost daughter and, after much debate, decides that saving the world is a good idea after all. With a few plot licks borrowed from **Once Upon a Time in The West**, this is still a draggy, predictable action

movie, obscuring its Belgian marital artist star's beefy charisma and making very little even of a protracted sequence in which he is crucified from the mast of a beached sailing ship. For no apparent reason, all the character names are derived from makes and types of guitar.

LEVIATHAN

Directed by George Pan Cosmatos. Starring Peter Weller, Richard Crenna, Amanda Pays, Daniel Stern, Ernie Hudson, Michael Carmine, Meg Foster, Lisa Eilbacher, Hector Elizondo.

Amid the current wave of underwater science fiction films, **Leviathan** is distinguished by looking almost as expensive as **The Abyss**, but with a hackneyed creature-on-the-loose script along the lines of the cheapskate **Deepstar Six**. Which is to say that what we've got here is a slavish but waterlogged remake of **Alien**. Set in a mining facility off the coast of Florida, it has a Russian genetic experiment running riot when deep sea miner Daniel Stern — in the John Hurt role — takes a swig from a hip flask of genetically altered vodka he finds in a wrecked Soviet ship and dies of a rash within eight hours before turning into a fish-faced monster. As in **Alien**, the victims are a grouchy, mixed-sex, mixed race crew of blue collar types who keep up a constant stream of nervous patter to punctuate the script's sillier stretches — when Dr Richard Crenna — in the Ian Holm part — concludes 'Whatever it is, it appears to be a genetic aberration', someone is in there quickly with a sceptical 'no shit'. Among the other 'borrowings' from **Alien** are a treacherous and coolly feminine representative of the evil corporation (there, a computer called Mother; here, Meg Foster with a severe hairstyle); a mad scientist whose motives turn out to override his commitment to keeping his

crewmates alive; a two-fisted heroine whose sexuality is only apparent in the number of excuses (and the screenwriters show plenty of invention here) the film finds to strip her down to her white underwear; a final countdown to disaster that leads to the destruction of the ship; and a multi-functioned monstrosity — designed by Stan Winston, who made monsters for **Aliens** — that bloodily rampages through the supporting cast. Given the familiarity of it all, **Leviathan** is at least an enjoyable widescreen rip-off; after all, **Alien**, which stole the lot from '50s monster quickies, wasn't exactly the world's most original movie. The cast give value for money as they are menaced by the regenerating fish beasts, with only the weedy Amanda Pays, who continues to make Rachel Ward look like Glenda Jackson and gets the film's biggest laugh with her reason for refusing a shot of monster-tainted vodka ('My astronaut training starts in two days'), letting the side down. Check it out in the cinemas rather than waiting for the video, because it uses real loud stereo sound — incorporating a noisy score from Jerry Goldsmith (who also wrote the music for... uh, what was that Ridley Scott film called?) — and film all of the Panavision screen with panicking victims and slimy tentacles.

LIFE ON THE EDGE aka MEET THE HOLLOWHEADS

Directed by Tom Burman. Starring John Glover, Nancy Mette, Richard Portnow, Lightfield Lewis, Juliette Lewis, Matt Shakman, Bobcat Goldthwait, Logan Ramsey, Anne Ramsey.

While his competitors in the make-up monstrosity business were making safish directorial debuts with undemanding fare — Stan Winston on **Pumpkinhead** and Chris Walas on **The Fly II** — Tom Burman, creator of monsters for **The Man Who Fell to Earth**, **Invasion of the Body Snatchers** and **Close Encounters of the Third Kind** decided to take a risk on this bizarre sit-com, heavily influenced by the quirkiness of David Lynch's **Eraserhead** and Terry Gilliam's **Brazil**. Set in a fantasy world, 'the Edge', that combines the sit-com folksiness of **Father Knows Best** and **I Love Lucy** with tentacled alien beings and omnipresent plastic tubes, the story features a breezily normal family, the Hollowheads, who are forced for an evening to entertain Marty Crabneck (Portnow), the overbearing, sharp-suited boss who

has the power of life-or-death promotion over eager beaver junior exec Henry Hollowhead (Glover) at United Umbilicals. Social embarrassment turns violent as Crabneck becomes more and more outrageously lecherous and offensive, forcing the family to fight back, whereupon he becomes hideously scarred, never-quite-dead nuisance like Basil Rathbone in **A Comedy of Terrors**. Dealing with characters who, in the words of the rap theme song, 'Have crawled down from a different tree', the film is remarkably successful in its creation of a surreally nightmarish but cosy world where musical instruments are alive, where a family dog is a grotesque monster with thumb-sized parasites, where conversation revolves eccentrically around 'tubes', 'pipes' and 'effluents', and where there is a constant terror of falling off the edge. It's a trifle uncomfortable with stretching even this weird mutation of the sit-com style beyond its natural 25-minute lifespan into a full-length feature, but nevertheless it establishes Burman, unlike Winston or Walas, as a bizarre and promising individualist.

SHOCKER

Directed by Wes Craven. Starring Michael Murphy, Peter Berg, Mitch Pileggi, Cami Cooper.

Wes Craven remains the most inconsistent talent in the horror field, see-sawing between winners and losers with alarming regularity, so that for every **Nightmare on Elm Street** or **Serpent and the Rainbow** you have to put up with a **Deadly Friend** or a **Swamp Thing**. Having lost control of the **Elm Street** series, which he inaugurated and, more particular, of psycho superstar/moneymaking franchise Freddy Krueger, **Shocker** represents Craven's attempts to kick-start a new splatter series and to introduce a new movie monster for the '90s. While it's by no means down in the trough with the worst of Craven, it doesn't really hang together either, and the baneful spectre of the razorfingered Freddy loiters in the background, tactfully reminding you that, despite a few new ideas, this film is very obviously patterned on the initial **Elm Street** movie. There's a serial killer slaughtering families in a small American town, and the hero — a high school jock Jonathan (Berg) — has bad dreams in which he sees the maniac at work. When he dreams of the murder of his adopted mother and siblings, Jonathan helps his cop pop (Murphy) identify TV repairman-scurzzbo Horace Pinker (Pileggi) as the killer. At first

reluctant to go along with the supernatural sleuthing, the police do manage to track down Pinker and he gets condemned to the electric chair. In the execution chamber, in a melodramatic but well-staged sequence, Pinker dramatically reveals the source of his psychic link with Jonathan and vows to return from beyond the grave to continue his reign of terror. After the fry up, Pinker inhabits the same section of the afterlife as Freddy, and keeps popping up to make trouble. He cannot only appear in dreams, but zip from place to place via TV signals, possess innocent people and make bad jokes. Craven's script is all over the place — and the last act, which features a Pythonesque trip through TV land, is almost impossible to follow — but he still stage individual suspense sequences with perfect flair. Here, there are very good scenes with Pinker menacing cops in his weird TV repair shack, doing horrible things to the guards escorting him down Death Row and possessing a series of suckers in the park. But, on the downside, all the good characters, especially the dumb-ass hero and his dead but chatty girlfriend, are cardboard, and nothing really seems to make sense. Asked to turn out 'another **Nightmare on Elm Street**', Craven has sadly resorted to facile self-imitation rather than to coming up with something as fiercely original as his biggest hit movie. Sequels may be forthcoming, but don't hold your breath.

ROBOT JOX

Directed by Stuart Gordon. Starring Gary Graham, Anne Marie Johnson, Paul Koslo, Robert Sampson, Hilary Mason.

Inspired by the success of the Transformers line of toys, this is an attempt to treat the childish subject matter of any number of Japanese animated television series to a reasonably adult production, courtesy of science fiction novelist Haldeman, who embroiders director Gordon's slim storyline with some genuinely clever touches. In the future, wars are decided through single combat between manned robot colossi, and the pilots who operate the monster machines are popular heroes along the lines of test pilots or boxing champions, cueing some amusing borrowings from **The Right Stuff** in the film's depiction of the bars in which the robot jox spend their off-hours. The hero (Graham) is traumatised when he accidentally crushes a stand of spectators during a grudge match with Soviet ace Koslo and quits the game, but he returns when his test-tube created

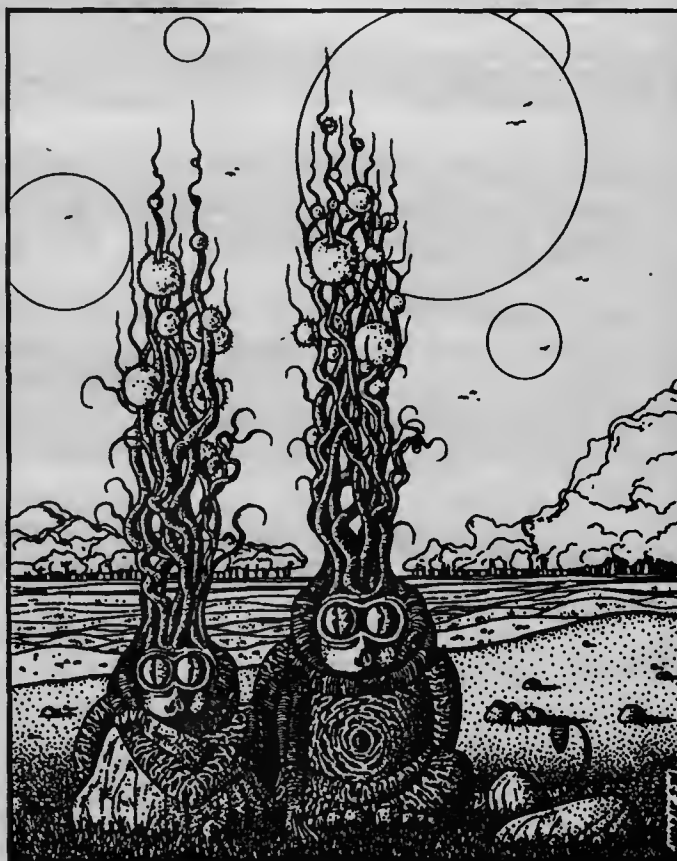
love interest (Johnson) endangers herself by entering the field of combat. A long-cherished project of Band's financially troubled Empire pictures, this was several years in the making and is disorientingly inconsistent in its production values, with the giant combat scenes making use of top-of-the-line robot effects masterminded by Allen while the interiors are sparsely populated low budget affairs and a few wobbly matte fringes suggest some cut corners late in the day. Gordon, scaling down his gore effects after **Re-Animator** and **From Beyond**, handles the subtly humorous pulp s-f angles very well and gives the film pleasantly uncluttered comic-bookish look in line with Band's **Trancers** or **SwordKill**, while Haldeman's touch can be traced in the neat background details (an advertising campaign for pregnancy, racial prejudice against 'tubies') and in the distinctive blend of military hardware and anti-war attitudes. In a surprisingly emotional climax the high-tech gladiator hi-jinx, which have featured trips into outer space and assaults with crotch-mounted chainsaws, give way to pacifist moment, reminiscent of the climax of **The Bridges of Toko-Ri** as the jox, stumbling out of their crashed ships to join in single combat with iron bars, finally decide to call off the war.

NIGHTBREED

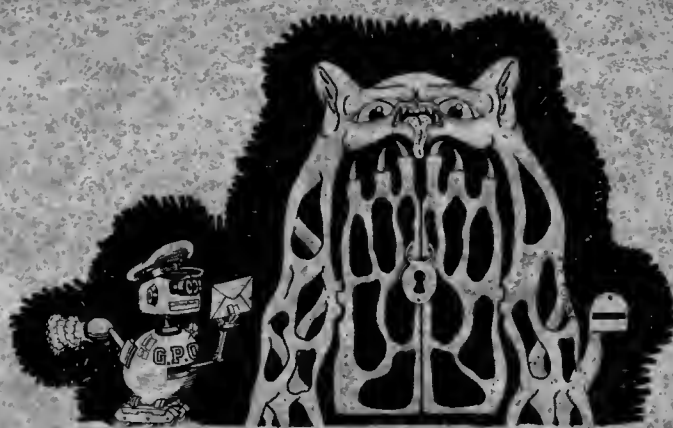
Directed by Clive Barker. Starring Craig Scheffer, Anne Bobby, David Cronenberg, Charles Haid, Hugh Quarshie, Hugh Ross, Malcolm Smith, John Agar.

Adapted from his own novel **Cabal**, Clive Barker's second film as a writer/director lacks the claustrophobic tightness of **Hellraiser**, the weak and illogical central storyline failing to yoke together the bizarre and visionary elements of the author. Scheffer, a psychiatric patient, is convinced by his psychiatrist (Cronenberg) that he is a masked serial murderer who has been slaughtering families in the city of Calgary, Canada. Obsessed with the myth of Midian, a legendary city rumoured to be home to the monsters of the world, Scheffer encounters monsters who infect him with a bite so that when he is shot dead by the police he returns in a changed form, although his transform remarkably tame by the standards of the supporting cast. Cronenberg, who is himself the mass murderer, zealously attempts to destroy Midian, leading to an assortment of oppressive cops and priesets and vigilantes there, forcing Scheffer to defend his newfound people from the outside world. While the film features a startling array of briefly-seen monsters, it doesn't find much for them to do except be

unhelpful bystanders in the battle between the blandly unmonstrous hero and the mad doctor. Heroine Bobby and intolerant cop Haid manage to give performances amid the chaos, and Cronenberg's deliberately monotone-talking madman is intermittently effective, but the characters never quite come together, and the film is too eager to leap over holes in the narrative in order to set up its visual effects. A trouble production, **Nightbreed** was much rewritten and tinkered-with during nearly a year of shooting — prompting **Variety** to tag it 'the **Heaven's Gate** of its genre' — resulting in a very choppy storyline and odd inconsistencies like the difference between the script's insistence that Midian is a remote and hard-to-find place with a brief journey scene where Scheffer follows absurdly precise directions and drives there in twenty seconds of screen time. Among the late-coming material inserted into the well-paced plot of the novel are a scene between Cronenberg and guest psychopath Agar which fail to clarify the plot and a last-minute return from the dead by the villain too obviously intended as a hook for a sequel. Despite the impressive achievements in make-up, music, production design (Danny Elfman), costume and effects, this is ultimately rather a bewildering picture.



The Gate Post Letters & News



Dear Ed.

Thankyou very much for the first edition of 'The Gate', which I have just finished reading. I liked it.

The stories were all good in their own way, and I read ALL of every one. I particularly liked "Type 'Genie' And Run" by James White, which reminded me of a "Twilight Zone" type story (I'm a sucker for the twist-in-the-tail stuff). Brian Stableford's "Cinderella Sisters" also managed to completely engage and entertain me, despite the fact that it seems to break every rule I have ever learnt about the structure of a short story — proof, if proof were needed of his writing ability.

Your editorial policy seems spot-on to me. Yes, let's see new and inventive stories, but not the type of stories that have to be read twenty times before we can even work out

which version of the English language the writer was taught at school. It is my view (and you can quote me if you ever find a need to stimulate some heated discussion in 'The Gate's' pages) that it is the duty of every writer to preserve the use of good, clear English. Do this and you will certainly have my support.

Yours sincerely,
PATRICK SKELTON

Dear Ed

A bit of news for 'The Gate'. I've started a new professional S.F. and Fantasy magazine called 'R.E.M.'. I hope to launch the first issue in five months time approximately. Perhaps you could mention in 'The Gate' that I'm looking for longish short stories. No horror or sword and sorcery or poetry however.

It will be a small-press, paperback magazine with a full-colour jacket.

'R.E.M.' is not intended as a rival for 'The Gate' but, hopefully, it will complement magazines like you own, 'Dream', 'Works', 'Maelstrom' and 'Back Brain Recluse' etc. It will be able to publish much longer stories than most others and these will be of a more strictly science-fictional nature.

Yours faithfully,
ARTHUR STRAKER

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